Monday Night Meditation Talk: The Awakened Heart and Loving Kindness

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 2:19:35

I appreciate you sharing this transcript, but I'm not able to transform this particular text into a polished article. Looking at the content, the vast majority of it consists of pre-talk chatter, greetings, casual conversation, music interludes, and logistical announcements rather than actual dharma teaching content.

The only substantive teaching content appears in the final few paragraphs, which amount to welcoming remarks and a brief mention of the winter solstice. There isn't enough actual dharma talk material here to create a meaningful article about "The Awakened Heart and Loving Kindness."

If you have a more complete transcript that includes the actual body of Jack Kornfield's talk on this topic, I would be happy to help transform that into polished written text. Alternatively, if this is all the material available, I could simply clean up those final introductory paragraphs, though they would only constitute a brief welcome rather than an article on loving kindness.

When we have our break, please introduce yourself to those who've come new and welcome them. And welcome also to the folks who are either upstairs or watching online.

Monday night ordinarily is relatively simple. We sit for a time in meditation and then take a break to stretch or relax, and then usually there's some teachings. But tonight the order of things will be somewhat different. We'll sit for a bit and then do both some teachings and practices together, ending with a ritual of blessing cords for the year ahead. Then we'll end a bit early and have time for cookies and reception and connecting with people as you wish.

For those who haven't come before, Spirit Rock has grown in this beautiful valley through the collective efforts of a whole community of people devoted to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—that are central to the teachings of the Buddha but that are really part of all wise spiritual life. As most of you know, we have residential retreats and classes and programs for families and teens, programs for healthcare professionals and educators and lawyers, programs that teach movement, dedicated programs for those who want to study the full compass of the Buddha's teachings, and lots of trainings in compassion and forgiveness and loving-kindness and mindfulness. You can look on the website to find it all.

Whatever brings you here, the gates of the Dharma, the teachings, welcome you. Welcome whatever color

or race or class or creed or background, whatever your ability or your sexual orientation or anything else about you. Please come in. All of you is welcome.

Let's begin with some silent meditation, with a little bit of instruction for those who are new. We'll probably sit for about twenty minutes tonight before we go on.

If you can, let yourself sit in a way that is stable and upright and comfortable. If you're on the floor, let yourself sit in a way that feels at ease on the earth. You don't have to get into some weird posture—you are weird enough as you are without adding to it from your meditation. If you're in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Sit upright with some sense of dignity and presence.

The invitation of meditation, the game of meditation, is really to become present where you are and to open—to let the mind begin to settle and the heart soften and begin to be more fully present here.

Let your eyes close gently. And first just tune in. If you notice any obvious tightness or tension that you can easily release, do so. Let the eyes and face be soft. Loosen the jaw. Roll your head in a circle if you like to release your neck, and let it find a simple upright posture. Let the shoulders relax and the arms and hands rest easily. Maybe take a deep breath or two to release any further tension.

Now let the belly be soft, the breath natural. And let the heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness, with a spirit of compassion.

With this embodied presence, begin to notice the play of experience here and now, arising in the space of awareness. After just a minute or so, you notice how easily the attention drifts off to thinking and planning and remembering other places. So to deepen the sense of presence underneath the waves of thoughts or sounds or sensations, become aware of the wave of your breath and feel it—cool as it enters the nostrils, or swirling and tingling in the back of the throat, or the rise and fall of chest or belly. If it helps, you can put a hand on your belly and feel it rise and fall in the palm of your hand.

As you feel the breath, let the other experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breathing. And as the attention wanders off, bring it back to the breath quite gently when you notice. With each breath, calming and quieting body and mind.

Let the mindfulness be kind. Let's call it loving awareness. Receive whatever arises with loving awareness. If it's the breath, this breath, let the breath calm and settle. And if a strong experience arises—an emotion of sadness or excitement, or a big thought about something—then notice it and acknowledge it as if with a bow. Name it gently: "Oh, sadness," or "thinking," or "planning." As you acknowledge it with loving awareness, let it move through your body and mind like a wave. When it passes, or you're at ease with it, return to feel a few more breaths.

This breath. This moment's experience. Held with loving awareness.

teaching and Dharma teaching, which is the traditional word for offering practices and understandings

that bring inner well-being and inner liberation. Dharma is a Sanskrit word that means truth, truth-telling, but also it means the path of awakening.

These teachings are primarily reminders. It's not like this is something new, but rather it speaks to what you already know. So let yourself listen in a way that's at ease. You don't have to take any notes, there's no quiz at the end. Listen to feel what might resonate for you as true. And if it doesn't, then just let it go.

Over the course of this year on the Monday nights that I've been here, the theme has been true nature or Buddha nature—the nature of the awakened heart and awakened mind. It's a series of teachings that in Buddhist psychology are called the ten paramitas. Sometimes they're described as the perfections. I like to think of them as the innate qualities of heart and mind that we can remember and awaken and embody in ourselves. The Buddhist texts often begin with a lovely phrase that goes, "O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your fundamental dignity, your fundamental goodness."

I just came from a kind of strange conference. It was called the Evolution of Psychotherapy—six or seven thousand therapists, the largest therapy conference in the country, at Disneyland. Maybe they needed it, I don't know. Part of my presentation involved holding up the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual that has all the numbers your insurance company wants you to pin on somebody to make sure they can get treated properly. So it's all really about money and diagnosis—whether you have an affective disorder or a depressive disorder or a bipolar disorder or a sleep disorder or all kinds of disorders. It's all about your diseases. And the thing is, that's how they see you. You're seen as your problem.

I said, well, Buddhist psychology starts from the other end. It starts with the original dignity and beauty of every being. The diseases—you know, the problems—everybody has problems. Anybody here don't have problems? You can have your money back. But Buddhist psychology starts by seeing the secret beauty behind the eyes of every being.

Whether you're doing therapy—and I did a demonstration, which was kind of fun, two thousand people there, and somebody sits and tells me their problems, and everyone's watching, okay Jack, what is he going to do? And I just started by holding her hand. I did that for quite a long time. And everybody went, "Oh." You know, we don't even need to talk about it. We just need to make a connection, feel like somebody's there with us.

So I feel really grateful for these teachings and practices because they remind me, and the community, and people that I care about and am part of, who we really are. Over the course of these Monday evenings, the different qualities of the awakened heart were described: joy and integrity and generosity and patience and dedication and truthfulness and all these different lovely qualities. The last two are equanimity and love. I believe I talked mostly about equanimity last time. So sitting here for our last class of the year, we'll talk about love.

I remember this poem that begins, "In the evening you will be examined on love." It's a beautiful line—in the evening of your life, or in the evening when you really reflect on what matters. Or I think of my teacher Sri Nisargadatta in India who said at one point, "Wisdom says I am nothing and love says I am everything. Between these two my life flows." That's a very deep vision of who we are.

And so really we're talking about timeless qualities that are there in every human being. When you sit and come and sit in meditation—we just did twenty minutes of sitting. For those of you who are new, congratulations, you made it through twenty minutes.

Yes, there are practices to cultivate certain lovely qualities like compassion or forgiveness or presence. But mostly the game is to sit and let the mind quiet and tend the heart, and begin to listen to life itself, to the mystery of life. The question is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity.

And so you're not meditating in order to fix yourself—which I know you have tried, and you have a little success, but that's really not the point. The point is instead to become present for the mystery of your life in a loving way, with loving awareness.

Those slides that I showed, those images, are connected in a certain way with the fact that this is the solstice. Every day, half a million pounds of cosmic dust land on the earth. What that means is that as our planet is circling our home star, it is also moving through the space of the galaxies around the arm of the Milky Way. And it's not just empty space—there's all this cosmic dust. It's actually what you're made of, by the way, but we'll talk about that. Your body, anyway. And all the time, cosmic dust is raining down on our planet. And all the time, at the same time, we human beings are going through this metamorphosis called birth and death.

I've talked about the woman in Colorado—I can't remember her name right now—the artist who made the salt monument, this beautiful wooden chapel in which there's a huge lucite crystal that turns every 24 hours, filled with 7.2 billion grains of salt. Every morning as a priestess, she takes a little vial of 250,000 grains of salt and pours it in the top and makes a prayer for all those who were born that day. And then every evening she draws off a little vial of 200,000 grains of salt for all those who left, who died that day. She does this every day as a priestess for the hundreds of thousands who come in and go each day.

This is us. This is human incarnation, and it's so mysterious. The earth is turning, and tomorrow night—maybe, or the next one—will be the longest night of the year. And then everybody around the world, in their own way, or almost everybody, finds some celebration for the light to return. Here we are in the northern hemisphere, for right now. Whether it's Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or whatever holy holiday it is, there's something about the return of the light.

As my poet friend D. Nurkse 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 begin again."

There's something about life that wants to renew itself no matter what. It just does. And it's completely

trustworthy. You are that life. You're constantly renewing yourself. In the time it takes to say one sentence, 50,000 new cells are born in your body. Hello, I'm here, you know, working for you. It's so mysterious.

So then what are you going to do with this? How are you going to navigate this mysterious human incarnation?

After his enlightenment, as the story or the myth is told, the Buddha sat there for a while under the tree of enlightenment. Then it is said he gazed around the world with eyes of compassion that could see at great distances. When he looked across the wide world, he saw beings everywhere who wanted to be happy, but many of them doing the very things that would create suffering. Tears began to stream down his cheeks. When they hit the ground, it is said they turned into the goddess Tara, who became the bodhisattva of compassion, to offer compassion to the whole world.

He saw that beings want to be happy. And then he said, "I have found a way for us to be happy as human beings." Let me walk, as he did, for the benefit of beings. Remind them of what's possible. So for forty-five years he walked the dusty roads of India, encountering one person after another and saying, "You too—hey, here's a way to awaken. Here's a way to be happy."

Meditation is not a grim duty. There's a certain way that for certain people spiritual practice gets mixed up with, you know, vitamins and cod liver oil or something. You have to do it, right? But it's not that. It's a reminder that we can quiet ourselves and tend the heart and listen to what really matters.

I have this letter I've read before. It came from a middle school student when their class came to Spirit Rock. It's written in that sort of tentative middle school script with bad spelling and all:

"Dear Jack, Our middle school came to your center to learn meditation. At the time, I didn't think it mattered much and I just wanted to sit with my friends."

Now my mom and I are having some really bad fights and stuff, and I don't know what to do. I go out on the roof and sit, and I don't know why, but I remember back to what you taught us and the little bit of meditation I learned, and it helps me not be so mad and upset. I can even talk to her sometimes afterward. We should learn this stuff in school.

And it wasn't very long—like an hour or an hour and a half. You can do this. It's possible for us.

The teachings of this perfection of the heart, of loving-kindness, are expressed in a beautiful way in Buddhist teachings, in the Metta Sutta, the Sutra of loving-kindness, where the Buddha speaks of loving all beings, of developing a heart of kindness like a mother holding her most beloved child. These teachings were actually given when some monks and nuns had gone into the forest to practice, and there were all kinds of sounds—wild animals and ghosts and spirits, or whatever one wants to listen to in the forest. They came back and said, "It's scary out there." And the Buddha said, "I will teach you a practice that

calms your fears."

Listen, my friends, we need this right now. There's a lot of anxiety running around in our culture, and there's a lot of people trying to make you afraid. As for the wild animals, one of my teachers who lived in the jungle said, "I'm not worried about the animals out there—the tigers and the bears and things like that. You want to see a dangerous animal? Look in the mirror."

So there's a lot of anxiety out there, and the teachings of loving-kindness are an antidote to this. The practice is to develop loving-kindness for oneself, for those we care about, for those beyond—the neutral ones—for those who are difficult, for beings everywhere. And the phrase I can hear Sylvia Boorstein, my colleague here, saying, because she loves this phrase: "Omitting none. Leaving none of them out."

This is the biblical Corinthians expression: "If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I become as sounding brass or a clanging gong. And if I have the gift of prophecy and know all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing."

In the end, what really matters is the question: Omitting none.

We live in a time of so much divisiveness and fear and racism, and also the destruction of the environment. The quality of loving-kindness—omitting none—means to bring them all in, to listen to every part. The Zen poet Ikkyu says: "Every day I hear the priests chant the sacred words. They should learn to read the love letters sent by the wind and the rain, the blossoms and the moon." The world itself, that mysterious world you are seeing, all those amazing pictures, is talking to you, saying, "Here you are on this extraordinary planet. Please listen. Please pay attention." And then the instruction is to love, omitting none.

I just came back from teaching with Ram Dass. Some of you, many of you, probably know him—you know who he is anyway. I was teaching a retreat with my beloved Trudy, and we were there. It was a tough assignment, but we were on the beach in Maui with a few hundred people. Ram Dass is now eighty-six years old. He's in his wheelchair after a stroke, and he has aphasia, so he speaks somewhat slowly, with some difficulty, but his mind is clear. And he's become Mr. Love, basically. He just loves everything, omitting none.

It's really clear when you go to his home. He has this great big altar in his living room, and there's Buddha and Quan Yin and Mother Mary and pictures of Gandhi and Anandamayi Ma and pictures of all these great saints—Guadalupe and Jesus and his guru and various other great teachers. And for a long time, in the middle was a picture of Dick Cheney. He said, "This is my practice." As Father Greg Boyle, who works at Homeboy Industries, says, "Sometimes you have to work with Jesus in his least recognizable form."

But Ram Dass says, "I love it all. I love this room. I love the people in front of me. I love the sky. I love everything. Everything." And he keeps saying it.

You think, oh yeah, right. Somebody says, "I love you." Yeah, that's a good moment. But how long will it last? They have other feelings. And he just goes on and on. Pretty soon you start to enter into this field of love and actually believe him. He says, "I love it all. I love the carpet here. I love the lights. I love the darkness out there and the stars. I love the colors of your hair, and the bald ones too. I love you all."

In fact, my friend Mickey Lemley, who's a wonderful filmmaker, heard Ram Dass say this and said, "Ram Dass, you love everything? How about this dirty carpet?" He said, "Oh, I love it. I love it all." So a couple weeks later, in a beautiful gilded frame, comes a piece of really dirty carpet from the place where Ram Dass was teaching. Mickey said, "Okay Ram Dass, put this on your altar next to your guru." And he did. There's his guru, and there's Gandhi, and there's Buddha, and there's the carpet.

Here you were, born into this human incarnation. No one knows quite how we got here, but we have it. And what are you going to do with it? What was born into you is love. Lots of things are born into you, but one of the central qualities born into you as a human being—and all you have to do is look at the gaze of a newborn and their mother, assuming a healthy birth and not a lot of trouble in that regard. It's just natural to us as human beings. But we forget it.

So this is a passage from one of my favorite figures in Los Angeles, Father Greg Boyle. He has a new book called *Barking to the Choir*, which I recommend. And his last one, called *Tattoos on the Heart*, is one of my favorite books of the last decade or two. He was the founder of Homeboy Industries. He talks about working with gang kids, all kinds of other stuff that he does in the barrios there. Very, very moving.

Here he's working with a group of kids who've been in these gangs, and he says, all right, I've got to talk to them one at a time. And this day, in line, the next kid, the next homie approaches. It's all swagger. He's walking in, his head bobbing side to side, making sure everybody's seeing how cool he is. He sits down, we shake hands, but he seems unable to shake the scowl etched across his face.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Sniper," he sneers. Got a gun in his pocket.

Okay, look, I've been down this block before. "I have a feeling you didn't pop out of your mom and she took one look at your ass and said, 'Sniper.' Come on, dog, what's your name?"

"Gonzales." He relents a little.

"Okay, now, son, I know the staff here will call you by your last name. I'm not down with that. Tell me, mijo, what's your mom call you?"

"Cabrón." There's even the slightest flicker of innocence in his answer.

"Oh, yeah, dude, but son, I'm looking for birth certificate here. Come on." And we sit quietly. The kid softens. I can tell it's happening, but there's embarrassment and a newfound vulnerability.

"Okay, padre. Napoleon." He manages to squeak it out, pronouncing it in Spanish.

"Wow," I say, "that's a fine, noble, historic name. But I'm almost positive that when your jefita calls you, she doesn't use the whole nine yards. Come on, mijito, do you have an apodo? What's your mom call you?"

And then I watch him go to some far distant place, a location he has not visited in some time. His voice, body language, his whole being are taking a new shape right before my eyes. Sometimes his voice is so quiet I lean in.

"Sometimes, when my mom's not mad at me, she calls me Napito."

And I watch this kid move, transform—from Sniper to Gonzales to Cabrón to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she's not pissed off at us.

So who are we? We have all these roles and all these things that we do, but what was born into us? What is our nature? And when we remember that love—that underneath there's a vulnerability and a beauty and a kind of courage, both to be touched by the world and to respond to the world—then we find tears. Not just the tears of what happened to you in your own personal trauma, but something called the tears of the way. The heart is simply touched. Life itself is poignant.

If you search for the awakened heart, says Chögyam Trungpa, you find that you're looking into space. There's nothing tangible. But if you put your hand through your ribcage and feel for it, what you find is tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the world, you feel a kind of sadness that doesn't come from being mistreated or insulted or impoverished. This experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely open, exposed. It is this tender heart—the tender heart of a warrior—that has the power to touch and heal the world.

So you get quiet and you really listen and you remember this is in you. But also what is in you, as a child of the spirit, is the spirit of joy. This too is born in you.

Especially for this solstice time of renewal—this is why you can see ninety-year-old widows committed to tending small flowers in the spring, and ten-year-olds with very little to eat caring for stray kittens, holding them to their skinny chests. Painters going blind paint more. Composers going deaf write great symphonies. As we give ourselves to life, it floods through us. It will renew itself. As Pablo Neruda says, you can pick all the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There's something that wants to renew itself each time the globe goes around the sun. All right, let's start again. This is who we are.

Now the next thing I would like us to do tonight is something rather demanding, and I hope you're up for it. But on the other hand, you paid your eight dollars or whatever they charged you, so you need to get your money's worth, right? It will be a meditation that we'll do for about ten minutes. The reason it's demanding—we're going to do a loving-kindness practice a little bit later—is that it's a paired meditation. So for the introverts among you, I apologize in advance. However, I think you'll find it worthwhile.

Without making a single sound, staying quiet, turn to somebody next to you so you can do a ten-minute meditation with them, and then I'll guide it. You don't have to say anything. And if you can't find somebody to turn to, stand up and put your hand in the air, staying silent, and turn in a circle—there will be another hand that goes up. Come on, you can do it. I know you're capable of standing up.

So here's the practice of the awakened heart. I tend to do this kind of thing on certain retreats or workshops, but I thought, hey, what the heck—it's solstice and we might as well go through it together.

Sit comfortably facing your partner in whatever way you can. You don't have to make big changes, but find a position where you can comfortably see your person. Staying silent, come back to yourself. Take a couple of deep breaths, releasing any tension you might be carrying.

And now, as you do, let your eyes open and gaze into the eyes of the human being sitting across from you. If you feel discomfort or an urge to laugh or look away, just note this embarrassment with patience and gentleness, and come back when you can to your partner's eyes.

For you may never have the opportunity to see this person in this way again. And whether it's embarrassment or shyness, you can see the eyes of this human being given to you in this moment in a new way.

There are four qualities of the awakened heart, and I invite your loving awareness to notice them.

First, as you look into this person's eyes, let yourself see the beautiful spirit that's behind them. A being who wants to love and be loved. A being of dignity and presence. Open your eyes to the beauty that's behind these eyes before you, and open your awareness to the gifts and strengths, the potential in this being. Behind these eyes are unmeasured reserves of courage and intelligence, of patience and wit and wisdom. There are great gifts there that this person carries to the world.

As you see the beautiful spirit behind these eyes, let yourself sense how much you wish for their well-being—that they be free from difficulty, that they be well. And know that what you are now experiencing is the natural loving-kindness that's there in the heart, to be opened to each being.

Now, as you continue to gaze into these eyes, take a deep breath and let go of the loving-kindness. Look again more deeply and let yourself become aware of the measure of sorrows that are behind these eyes. Their suffering and struggle accumulated in their life, as in all human lives, that you can only guess at. There are disappointments and failures and losses and loneliness, hurts beyond the telling. Let yourself open to this measure of pain, to the hurts that this person may never have told another being. The insecurity, the loss. You cannot fix their pain, but you can be with it. With a spirit of courage, you can simply be present for the suffering.

And then imagine this being as a frightened or hurt child. How naturally you would reach out to hold them, to comfort them. As you are present for the sorrows of this being, know that what's awakened in

you now is the great heart of compassion. It is essential for the healing of the world.

Now, as you continue to gaze into these eyes, take another deep breath and let the compassion drop away. Look even deeper. As you see anew, you can see born into this being the child of the spirit. As you look into the eyes of this person, let yourself imagine their happiest moments as a child, their best adventure—laughing and playing and learning to run and catch and make friends, the joy that was born within them. All the marvels when they first saw a rainbow, when they first saw the ocean. That child of the spirit is still within them, behind these eyes. You can imagine them even now laughing and dancing and bringing their joy to life.

As you open to this dimension, what you are now experiencing is called in Sanskrit *mudita*—the joy in the happiness of another. The shared joy of life. The inviolable spirit that was born into this human being.

And finally, continuing to gaze for the last time, release the joy and let your awareness drop deep, like a stone sinking below the level of what words can touch, to the web of connection that underlies all life in which you've taken birth—the consciousness behind these eyes. See the being before you as if seeing the face of one who at another time and another place was your brother or sister. Was your mother or father. Was your friend. Was your enemy. Was your student. Was your teacher.

Now you feel yourself connected in consciousness itself. Look deeply behind these eyes. Who is this being? And who are you that is looking? Who am I? Not the body or the thoughts or the small self. You are the timeless awareness, unborn consciousness. You are loving awareness itself, born into this body.

Turn and ask: Who am I really? Who is gazing? And who is being seen?

Relax and rest in pure awareness itself. Trust it. It is your home.

the fires in Sonoma and Napa and now in Ventura and all these people who lost their homes, and the refugees crowding the world. There are more refugees than at any time since World War II, and actually we're just about to exceed that number. The terrible things in Syria or in Libya—I could just start naming the places in the world. Or the people on our streets who are homeless, or our crazy racist poverty prison system that locks up millions of people, or the loss of species.

This is also true: if you're born into human life, you will have pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame. Don't despair. Despair is not the game. Rather, let yourself see through the heart.

What you just did was an invitation to step out of the small sense of self, the sense of separateness—what's called the body of fear—and see with the eyes of wisdom and love. And then as you do and move through the world, you can reach out and mend that which you can. You can plant beautiful seeds. You can respond to your brothers and sisters.

I was reading about training for companies and communities around sexual harassment and Me Too. There's not a woman that I know who wouldn't say Me Too. It's really part of the structural oppression of

women that's been worldwide for such a long time. But what I was reading is that most of those trainings are useless. And the most effective training is actually training for bystanders to intervene. It's not about those people—it's about all of us taking responsibility to say, "Did you mean to say that?" To really step in, not in a way that exacerbates it, but to get trained in a way with your heart that says, "Hey, this is not how we treat people. Did you mean that? Did you really want to say that?" There are ways to do this, and this is how we mend the world.

We look at the world and it turns out that, as in most cultures, those around us are all our brothers and sisters, our uncles and aunts. Auntie Hillary and Uncle Donald. That's just how it is. Every family has one, right? But what matters as you move through the world is how you touch it. Because this is what's given to you.

So again, here's Father Greg:

Andre was abandoned by his mother when he was nine years old and left homeless for a couple of years. He has always been a clear example for me of the soul's deepest longing to inhabit its truth. The one thing he wanted more than anything was to improve his vocabulary. He'd been a gangbanger, but now he was trying to learn something new.

"I was enumerating all the things I needed to do today," he'd say. And then he'd add, "Enumerating means making a list." If he agrees with me, he says, "I concur."

He actually told a room full of shrinks during a talk in San Diego—because Father Greg brings his homies to talk to the judges and the therapists and Congress, for that matter—he told them that at Homeboys Industry, he had managed to metamorphosize himself. Then he told them, "That means change."

So one day he came to work and plunked himself down in my office. "Last night, I was walking home from King Taco, you know, on Soto. Anyways, before I get to my canton, I'm crossing in front of that tiny park. You know the one. I see an old man lying on a bench. He's either asleep or trying to sleep. There's a half-full forty on the ground in front of him. And the old guy, well, he's shivering because it's cold. So you know my favorite sweater?"

I nod yes, though I don't know what he's talking about, but I don't want to derail him.

"Well, I was wearing it, and I took it off, and I laid it over this guy. He didn't wake or notice."

And for a moment, Andre enters a sort of trance, and then suddenly he's shaken from it. "Hey, I'm not telling you all this so you think I'm like all that." He stops again to think, and some long-held emotional stirring comes to the surface, making it momentarily hard to get the next words out. "Nah, I'm telling you all this because I know that bench." He gathers himself. "I've been on that bench."

And this is us. This is us in this world. What do we do and how do we respond when we are touched by the human beings who are around us?

Love is mysterious. Nobody can say exactly what it is. It's mysterious like gravity. What's gravity? Well, it pulls things together. And love is cosmic allurement, like gravity—that bodies at a distance want to come together. I think it's the memory that we were all together in the Big Bang and we miss each other.

And there are all different kinds of love. I love chocolate ice cream. I do. It's pretty great. You can love certain sports and things like that. That's a kind of love. Or there's sort of businessman's love—I'll love you this much if you give me that much in exchange. And it's all right.

And then there's romantic love. You've all tried. You know how it is. It's beautiful for a time, and then it changes. It changes.

But all of them are really the longings to connect, to make something a part of us, to feel a connection with one another. Rumi calls us "love dogs." We're all love dogs seeking love. And then there's that phrase: it's better to be wanted by the police than not wanted at all. That's how it is. We need each other.

But the deeper love—which you were just allowing yourself in many of your cases to feel and sense as you sat with another—is the love for no reason. The happiness for no reason, the joy for no reason. It's because it's who you are. You are loving awareness that was born into this body and is going through a rather interesting incarnation. And then you'll leave it at some point. You'll see. "Wow, what an incarnation that one was. Check it out." You'll see.

And the nice thing about love is that we catch it from one another. You can catch it.

I remember going to Calcutta to visit my teacher, Dipa Ma, one of my teachers. She was one of the greatest meditation masters within the Theravada tradition—wherever these Buddhist teachings come from—of India and Burma and Thailand and so forth. An amazing teacher, an amazing meditation master.

I went to visit her to get some teachings, and also I was having a hard time. I'd been teaching for about ten years and I was kind of burned out. I was on the road a lot and seeing people all the time, and I just needed some renewal. "Am I doing it right? Should I continue?"

She gave me some lovely teachings. And then before I left—she was this tiny little woman who had all kinds of magic powers—but anyway, this tiny little woman, first she reached under her mattress and gave me some money to get a gift for my mother. That's how it was. We were in this funky apartment in Calcutta, and it was summertime in Calcutta.

Then she said, "Well, I have to bless you before you go." And so she threw her arms around me. Bengalis hug—it's really kind of wonderful. Then she started to do a blessing, and she put her hands all over my body and was saying the phrases of loving-kindness—"May you be safe and well" and so forth—in Sanskrit and Pali, touching me like this. I'm just standing there, and pretty soon I start to smile. She keeps doing it, and I start to smile more and more. By the time she was done, I was kind of drunk. "Thank you, Ma. Thank you, Ma."

I go out in the street and it's boiling hot. I try to find a taxi and it's crowded. This was the old days before India modernized. In Calcutta there were cows wandering down the street and men pulling rickshaws. I get an old taxi and it's incredibly hot, and we're stuck in traffic for an hour and a half or two hours to get to Dum Dum Airport—which is the name of Calcutta's airport, I tell you. Then I get there and it's not air-conditioned. There are long lines. I'm waiting in the long lines. Finally I get on my flight. It's a couple hours later. I'm on my flight to Bangkok. I get off in Bangkok. Immigration, and there's more long lines. Bangkok is sweltering.

The entire time, I'm just grinning like this. In fact, for three days. In sleep, I'd fall asleep and wake up smiling. I don't know what she did to me, but it was like zap.

We catch it from each other. It's like the story I sometimes read of the woman who was a chaplain in a hospital, who goes around to bless the hands of everyone twice a year—the surgeons and the nurses. But she says, "What I try to do is go down to the basement and find the people who wash the dishes and clean the linens and clean the toilets." And now they wait for her to have their hands blessed. Someone will say, "This is the most meaningful thing that happens to me all year—that someone comes as a chaplain and does this beautiful blessing." It's not necessarily a huge thing, just a very simple gesture. And yet... and yet, this begins to have the power to change the world.

You become more fearless, more hospitable, more gracious, more willing to see what's possible. Because if you can't see it and hold the possibility, you're lost. Gandhi again: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Always." Think of it. Always. There's something about the vision of what's possible for us as human beings.

And it doesn't have to be big things, you know. Tonight as you leave, there will be people holding baskets to collect donations for the soup kitchen on B Street, Saint Vincent de Paul, which we've been doing for twenty-five years on Monday nights. It's a beautiful thing. I used to love to go down there and just give them a whole bag of cash—now we have to do a check thing or something, everything gets more official—but anyway, it's still a beautiful thing to go down and hang out, to help cook or help serve. Not because they need you—I don't know if they do—but because it does something for your own heart. That's why. It doesn't have to be great big gestures.

Here's a poem:

When I knelt to face him, he said my name—not the one he and my mother had given, but the long forgotten one he'd called me as a child: Lem. Her name's Emily, but he called her Lem. *Lem, he said, so matter of fact, as if half a century had not passed since anyone called me that. No sweltering station wagons of summer, no minnows and fishhooks, no father chasing a porcupine to offer a daughter a swatted towel full of quills. I wheeled him back to his room like he asked, although that's not what he meant—back through the hallway gauntlet of slack and spittle, past docile women in open back shifts left unsnapped for easy hygiene, past the*

unmistakable smell of shit, to his room with its narrow bed like a child's. It took two kind aides with arms like oars to lift him. They were men on a schedule, so many to tuck in by dark. Still, they paused for a moment as he settled, as the sheet floated quiet and white. They waited like parents do, before they turn off the light.

There's so much tenderness in this poem of caring for someone. This is as much love as some grand gesture.

And then people say, "Well, yeah, you see these images of Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion"—there's one upstairs with a thousand arms, you know. And you hear these vows: *Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all*—Kuan Yin Bodhisattva. But you say, "Hey, wait. I only have two arms. How can I do this?" Right?

Put your arms in the air, please. Look around. This is Kuan Yin. This is her. This is it. Yeah, how about that? Hallelujah.

Never underestimate the power of love. "When I look at that doorway, that gate," says Ram Dass, "I see a force that makes the Pentagon seem like children's toys." It's really the only power that can match the power of violence or the power of fear in the world. It is the one that lets mothers pick cars off children. It allows people to do extraordinary things because it's who we really are in the end.

And so—what matters? In your personal relationships, who in your life, in your world, wants to be seen with eyes of love? In your community, who wants to be seen with respect and love? In all the dimensions of the world, when you bring the quality of love, there's a listening and a care and accompaniment.

A gesture of respect and a kind of protection. Who wants to be seen with the eyes of love is also, like all beings, wanting to be protected. It's such a mystery, you know.

I like to read this story from Sharon Salzberg when she was teaching over at Jerry Brown's place in Oakland. He had this place called We the People, and she taught a day of loving-kindness practice. A woman came up afterward and complained, saying, "It feels so mechanical to wish people well in my mind. I don't think it's having any effect. It feels very dry to me." Sharon said, "Well, just keep doing it, like planting seeds. Go out and walk."

So the woman went out to walk on the train platform across the street at Jack London Station. As she was walking, doing her metta and feeling like a failure, down the long train platform—a train had come in—came a guy with a briefcase and a suit, sort of in a hurry. He looked kind of uptight. She looked at him and thought, "This guy looks really uptight." Then she said to herself, "Okay, I'm supposed to be doing loving-kindness. May he be well and safe." And then he walked right up to her. He said, "Ma'am, I never do this, but you have such a kind face, and I'm facing a really difficult situation. I'd just like to ask if you would pray for me." And then he walked on.

So you don't know. You don't know what it does.

But it's said that as you cultivate loving-kindness, there's a whole set of blessings. Your dreams become sweet. You fall asleep more easily and wake contented. It's a beautiful practice. And angels and devas will love and protect you. And men and women will love you too, if you're interested. Weapons won't harm you and poisons won't work. If you lose things, they're always returned to you. It says—I don't know. People will welcome you everywhere and your thoughts become more pleasant. Animals will sense this and love you, and elephants will bow slightly as you go by. Your voice becomes sweeter and your babies are happy in the womb and growing up. If you fall off a cliff, a tree will always be there to catch you. And the world becomes filled with beautiful beings when you practice in this way.

So let's do a few minutes of metta, and then we'll do a little ritual to end the evening. Why don't you stand up and stretch for a moment? You've been sitting a long time.

And when you're ready, sit back down. Let your eyes close gently and come back just to feel your breath and body, just here on this amazing planet moving through the solar system and the galaxies. You get the whole Disneyland ride of a human incarnation. And the earth holds you as your mother.

Now as you sit quietly, let yourself think of, picture, remember someone who you love a lot, where it's relatively easy. Someone—or if there isn't a person, it could be your dog. Wherever there's a kind of natural love. Picture this being who you love, this person, likely. As you see them, feel your natural care for them and the kind of well-wishing.

With the simple phrases of loving-kindness, which are like planting seeds, you can say softly inside, as you see them: May you be held in great loving-kindness. May you be safe, safe and protected. May you be healthy and strong, or healed. And may you be happy.

Feel this beautiful well-wishing. How much you care for them.

May you be filled with loving-kindness. Safe and protected. Healed and strong. May you be happy.

And if we were doing this as a practice for a longer period, we would bring in other people you love—friends and family and community.

But now let yourself imagine that this loved one gazes back at you. They look back and see you with the same eyes of love that you were gazing upon them. And they wish the same thing for you. They care about you. They want you to be well. And they look at you and they say, "May you too be filled with loving kindness, especially toward yourself." And they say, "May you too be safe and protected." Take it in from them, this blessing. They look at you and they say, "May you be strong and healed and well." And they say, "May you be happy." They wish for you to be happy. May you be happy. Take it in from their gaze and their words.

And now, if you're comfortable with it, put a hand on your heart or your body, and receive the phrases they've offered—those well-wishings directed now to yourself. May I be filled with loving kindness, just as

this loved one wants for you. May I be safe and protected. May I be strong and healed. And as they wish for you, may I be happy.

And as you feel the loving kindness in yourself, as you invite this, now imagine that you could spread it out from your heart, opening to all those seated in this room with you on our beautiful blue-green planet, dancing around our star, the sun. May all of you around be held in great loving kindness—safe and protected, healed and strong. And may you all be happy, truly happy. The joy for no reason. The well-being of life.

And finally, let it spread out from this room like a lighthouse or a beacon, out across the lands, in the waters of the bay, in the oceans, across the states and the continents and the whole world, to beings everywhere, far and near. Beings young and old. Beings human and non-human. Life. May all beings everywhere be held in great loving kindness. May all beings everywhere find safety and protection. May all beings everywhere be healed and strong. And may all beings everywhere find peace.

So that's, for those who haven't done it, a bit of loving kindness meditation. There are many ways you can learn it—books and downloads and so forth. And it's a beautiful practice to do and cultivate.

The last thing we're going to do this evening involves something to pass out among you all. What we're going to do—and it's of course totally voluntary—is to make what's called a blessing cord or a protection cord.

If you look across Buddhist Asia, all the way from Afghanistan through Southeast Asia and India and China and Japan, the thread or the cord is used as a symbol of the interconnectedness of all things, of interbeing. It's the sacred thread that weaves through all of life. And so you are woven in the thread of life and in the sacredness of life.

The reason it's this reddish color is that it's considered to be one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun. Basically, when you wear it, these are your robes, and you go into the marketplace—you're really a monk or a nun in drag, right? Your home is the temple, and you're visiting the marketplace.

Now, they're called blessing or protection cords. And one great Tibetan lama that I was doing this ritual with—we were both passing them out—somebody asked him, "Well, what exactly do they protect you from?"

And he said, "Well, yourself, of course," which is the main protection that people need.

So we're going to do a little ritual of creating the blessing cords. We have to tie three knots into them first.

The first knot, if you hold your cord up, is called the knot of refuge. In the Buddhist tradition, it would be to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—which is to say that you orient yourself toward that which is a basis for understanding. To take refuge in the Buddha means to see the Buddha in every being you meet. To take refuge in the Dharma is to follow what is true, or to follow the teachings that lead to

truthfulness and awakening. And to take refuge in Sangha—Sangha means community—means recognizing that you can't do it alone, that every moment of awakening or kindness or love or compassion that you develop in yourself affects your family and your friends and community and how you drive and ripples out across the world. We are interconnected in our awakening.

But if Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is not the refuge that touches your heart, then you can take refuge in whatever is sacred or holy. So hold your cord and reflect on what is your deep refuge. To see the Buddha in every being you meet. To take refuge in that which is sacred. And when you're ready, tie a knot in the center of the cord that is your reminder and commitment to stay tuned to your refuge.

Now, holding your cord, the second knot is the knot of compassion. The vow of compassion is to refrain from causing harm to yourself and to others. You understand, the circle of compassion has to include yourself. Traditionally it means not to cause harm in word and deed, through your actions, to take care with how you speak and how you act with others. Sometimes it's also the simplest principles of compassion: not to steal, to have reverence for life, to care for things, to not misuse the things of this world, to not misuse intoxicants, to not misuse sexuality but let it be an expression of awakening and of joy—to take care not to cause harm to yourself and others. This is the basis of compassion.

So reflect for a moment on what it means to live not causing harm to yourself and not causing harm to others. And when you're ready, tie the second knot into the cord, which is your commitment in this new year that starts in a day or so, the beginning of the returning of the light—to not cause harm to yourself, as best you can. You'll fail, of course, but then you get to start over again. These aren't commandments. These are practices, trainings.

And now the third knot. The third knot is the setting of an intention. The Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and he says, "May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for those to cross the flood. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be food for those who are hungry. May I be a lamp for those in the darkness. And may I carry this spirit until all beings are awakened together." However long that takes in the turning of the galaxies, may we all awaken together. This is my small dedication. Something like that—I will practice in this way.

I love the poem from my dear friend Diane Ackerman, where she writes: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning, and the wayfaring moon, and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

And so reflect for a moment: if you were to set an intention, it doesn't have to be quite so poetic or grand. Your intention could be as simple as, "I vow to be kind to myself and others." What intention, what turning of your heart in the direction of your own goodness and beauty, would you set as our Earth continues its beautiful turn around the sun again? This intention is a seed that grows within you.

And when you have your intention in mind and heart, tie the third knot in your cord, which is a reminder.

Your blessing or protection cord is now fully activated. Should you wish to wear it around your neck, even for a little while, place it there and let the two ends hang down. If you prefer to wear it around your wrist, wrap it a few times and let the two ends hang down. Then I'd invite you to turn to a person next to you and tie on their cord, offering them a silent blessing, and they will do the same for you.

I want to wish you all a beautiful holiday season. There will be no Monday class next week because it's Christmas Day. But this year we have a wonderful New Year's celebration with Wes Nisker, Nina Wise, Jennifer Bereson, and DJ Heartbeat. If you want a New Year's Eve party at Spirit Rock, eight in the evening to one in the morning—probably without the booze, but the rest of it will be pretty great. They're wonderful, and the music will be great, and I think the whole atmosphere will be special.

Lastly, I want to honor and recognize the many volunteers who help on Monday nights. Some of you have been helping for ten, twenty, or more years—people I have just come to love. In particular, I want to extend gratitude to Daniel Haggerty, a dedicated volunteer who has been helping make all the trails around Spirit Rock for you to walk on. He loves doing it, and it isn't easy—cutting trails, hiking trails, pretty intense labor, helping on Monday nights, doing all these things. Daniel, may you carry the blessings of this group and our metta and our healing energy so that you may be safe and well. Thank you for all your good work. And thank you also to the many other beautiful and dedicated volunteers who have been part of this.

So let's just meditate. Close your eyes for one last minute before you go out for the cookies. And that little smile—let that stay on your lips. Thich Nhat Hanh says that when you meditate, put a little half smile on your lips so that you sit with that quality of well-being in the midst of it all.

May you be safe and protected, everyone. Strong and healed. And may you live with a loving heart.

Thank you for your kind attention. It's just great to see you. Have a beautiful New Year. Take care with your families. You know, when Buddha and Jesus went home, they had trouble with their families too. So don't take it personally. That's why they call it the nuclear family—there's a reason for it. But it's okay. They're our people.

I'll see you in the New Year. Thank you.

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