Healing and Liberation through Mindful Loving Awareness

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:10:59

So please let yourself get settled again.

Sometimes I wonder—is this a big cocktail party, or is it actually that we need connection? I think the latter is true, and there's something kind of beautiful about it. Not to put down cocktails completely; there are places for parties. But when I actually listen and see and hear—because there are many people here whom I've seen in other months and other weeks and other years—there is something beautiful about feeling connection and community, whether you've just come and met someone or not. I appreciate that.

I'd like to share some teachings tonight, and perhaps some reflections as we go. For your part, you can take this as another form of meditation—a meditation of reflection or contemplation. If something in it seems valuable and rings true in your heart, beautiful, take that. And if it doesn't ring true, let it go. There's no quiz at the end, no grades or anything. It's really more a reminder, at best, of something that you already know.

Over the past few Monday nights this fall, I've been offering a series of teachings based on some big stories. Somehow I've become a storyteller. I've always loved stories, and it feels like a beautiful and fruitful way to teach. So I have at least one long story tonight, and maybe some others, to weave in for your reflection and understanding.

The theme tonight—going back to one I've taught in previous years—is healing, and in particular the quality of mindfulness, or mindful loving awareness, that brings both healing and liberation.

If you look at the texts, the great discourse on the path of mindfulness from the ancient Buddhist teachings begins: "My friends, there is a most wonderful way for living beings to realize purification, overcome directly grief and sorrow, end pain and anxiety, travel the path of awakening, and realize liberation. This is the establishment of mindfulness, of mindful loving awareness."

Established in four ways, a practitioner establishes mindful loving awareness in the body, in feelings, in thought and in the mind, and then in the dharma—in the principles that govern life. When you become mindful and aware of these dimensions of your human life, this becomes a gateway for your own wellbeing, happiness, liberation, joy, and of course, healing.

To set the tone for the story that will come shortly: when I was living in Southeast Asia for a number of years as a Buddhist monk, and also in the Peace Corps working on remote village tropical medicine teams,

I went to South Vietnam during what we call the Vietnam War—what they call the American War, because they had a whole series of wars with the French, and we were one of them.

I went in part to visit a temple run by the Coconut Monk, as he was called, who lived primarily on coconuts. It was on an island in the Mekong Delta—an island of peace. He was a great peacemaker monk, and I wanted to learn from him and his community.

I took a boat through the Mekong Delta during a time of heavy fighting. You could see helicopter gunships and firefights on the horizon. The odd thing—for those of you who have experience being around war—is that it takes place here, and then in the next village, other people are shopping and doing what they need to do to keep their lives going, because we're human beings and we still have to live.

The boat pulled up to the dock and I went into the temple. The monks were wearing robes with a patch that showed a broken assault rifle, snapped in half. It said in half a dozen languages: "We will fight no more." It was a refuge in the middle of the war.

I paid my respects and found some of the teachings. At the far end of this island, there was a hill, and on top of it stood a very big statue of the Buddha—perhaps forty feet tall. Next to him was a forty-foot-tall statue of Jesus, and they had their arms around each other's shoulders.

And there were the helicopter gunships, and the battle in the distance. This was the place where young men who didn't want to enter the military would come and become monks in order to be peaceful. It was as if those two statues were standing there saying, "Hey, we're brothers in this, and there's another way to live in this world than what you see out there." It was really beautiful.

Both the Buddha and Jesus were known as great healers, great physicians—healers of body, healers of heart, and healers of spirit. Healing, and beyond healing—not just healing of the body, but healing of who we are as human beings together—comes first out of a capacity for deep listening, a sense of connection with life that lets us understand.

So here is the first story. It comes from Richard Selzer, a wonderful professor at the medical school at Yale University, who is also a beautiful essayist. I received a note from him a few years ago because I had read some of his stories in my talks, and he was grateful that I shared them. I felt honored to receive that note.

Here is his story:

On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work at Yale appeared an announcement. "Yeshe Dunden," it read, "will make rounds at six o'clock on June 10th." The particulars were then given, followed by a notation: "Yeshe Dunden is the personal physician to the Dalai Lama."

I am not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Not only might such an attitude be inimical to one's earthly well-being, it could take care of eternity as well. Thus, on the morning of June 10th, I joined the clutch of white coats waiting in the small conference room adjacent to

the ward selected for rounds.

The air in the room was heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement. You can picture it.

At precisely six o'clock, he materialized—a short, golden, barrel-shaped man dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon. His scalp was shaven, and the only visible hair was a scanty black line above each hooded eye. He bowed in greeting while his young interpreter made the introduction.

Yeshe Dunden, we were told, would examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis was unknown to Yeshe Dunden, as it was to us. The examination would take place in our presence, after which we would reconvene in the conference room where Yeshe Dunden would discuss the case. We were further informed that for the past two hours, Yeshe Dunden had purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer.

I, having breakfasted well, performed only the most sultry of ablutions, and given no thought at all to my soul, glanced furtively at my fellows. Suddenly we seemed a soiled, uncouth lot.

The patient had been awakened early and told she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and had been asked to produce a fresh specimen of urine. So when we entered her room, the woman showed no surprise. She had long ago taken on that mixture of compliance and resignation that is the face of chronic illness. This was to be but another in an endless series of tests and examinations.

Yeshe Dunden stepped to the bedside while the rest of us stood apart, watching. For a long time, he gazed at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I too studied her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gave a clue to the nature of her disease.

At last he took her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bent over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes were closed as he felt for her pulse, and in a moment he had found the spot. For the next half hour he remained thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seemed to have been drawn down into this one purpose. It was palpation of the pulse raised to the state of high ritual.

From the foot of the bed where I stood, it was as though he and the patient had entered a special place of isolation, of apartness, about which a vacancy hovered and across which no violation was possible. After a moment, the woman rested back upon her pillow, and from time to time she raised her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sank back once more. I could not see their hands joined in a correspondence that was exclusive, intimate—his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offered at her wrist.

All at once I was envious—not of him, not of Yeshe Dunden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I wanted to be held like that, touched so, received. And I knew that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have not felt a single one.

At last, Yeshe Dunden straightened, gently placed the woman's hand upon the bed, and stepped back. The interpreter produced a small wooden bowl and two sticks. Yeshe Dunden poured a portion of the urine specimen into the bowl and proceeded to whip the liquid with the two sticks. This he did for several minutes until a foam was raised. Then, bowing above the bowl, he inhaled the odor three times. He set the bowl down and turned to leave. All this while he had not uttered a single word.

As he neared the door, the woman raised her head and called out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. "Thank you, doctor," she said, and touched with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshe Dunden turned back for a moment to gaze at her, then stepped into the corridor. Rounds were at an end.

We were seated once more in the conference room. Yeshe Dunden spoke now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds I had never heard before. He had barely begun when the young interpreter began to translate, the two voices in tandem—a bilingual fugue, one chasing the other, like the chanting of monks.

He spoke of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he said—the last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath.

Thus he spoke, and now we were silent.

"May we have the diagnosis?" a professor asked.

The host of these rounds, the one man who knew, answered: "Congenital heart disease. Interventricular septal defect with resultant heart failure."

A gateway in the heart, I think, that must not be opened. Through it charges the full waters that flood her breath.

So, here then is the doctor, listening to the sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf. He is more than doctor. He is priest. I know the doctor to the gods is pure, pure healing. The doctor to humans stumbles, most often wounds. Their patients must die, as must they. But now and then it happens, as I make my own rounds, that I hear the sound of his voice like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining, and then a jubilation possesses me and I feel myself touched by something divine.

I had a chance to be with Yeshe Dunden some years ago when I was dealing with a neurological problem

and got misdiagnosed, so it seemed way more serious than it turned out to be, fortunately. I went to see him. He took my pulses and looked at me, scanning, and I was in heaven. "Yeshe Dunden, fix me," you know. "I have a bad diagnosis"—that turned out not to be so. And he shook his head. He said, "It's not bad, really. Here, take these little pills." They sort of looked like rabbit droppings, basically—these little dark Tibetan medicine things. "Take these and do these meditations and you'll be fine." And somehow I felt much better even without taking that medicine, just seeing him.

But there's something in this story about our wish to be so held, so received, so respected as a human being by one another that I find inspiring and moving. And in fact, the whole world—the world itself, our family, our gardens, our co-workers, whatever the circumstances—the prisoners and the laborers and the guards and the co-workers and the managers and the parents and the teens and the grandparents, people actually do want to be received and understood and known.

And Yeshe Dunden in some ways shows the power of the listening heart, even in the face of the great reality of impermanence and suffering and illness and death—which it turns out is going to happen to you, by the way, if it hasn't yet. It's coming, really. I'm just giving you a little hint here. But it is. It's part of human incarnation. It's what's happened.

But in the same way, this also speaks to what it means to pay attention in a world that's riven by injustice and racism and conflict and climate difficulty. How do we listen to the pulse of the world? How do we listen to one another?

I remember sitting with a woman who was toward the end of her very painful chemotherapy. She had advanced metastatic cancer, and she said the chemo was like fire moving through her body. It was so painful. It was like being in hell. So I sat with her and held her hand for a while, and then I invited her to close her eyes as best she could and imagine somehow that the medicine coming through her was also purifying her, that it was leading her to a different body and a different way of being. We did a whole long visualization of a great healing temple and many things.

As she did it, she said, "Wow, yes, I can feel the fire. But when I feel it as something purifying, it comes surrounded by this beautiful green light and this lovely spirit, and all of a sudden I realize that this is exactly what I need for my body." It was the fact that she'd been resisting it—and understandably so, it was terribly painful and terribly frightening—but somehow as she let herself come close to it, like Yeshe Dunden touching that pulse, it transformed in some remarkable way.

And people transform when we let ourselves come close to them. Basically, loving awareness allows us to have a trust in the greater capacity of the heart to hold this human incarnation with all its tainted glory, its beauty and its pain, in a very different way when we listen deeply.

So the foundations of mindfulness—or mindful loving awareness—that I read in that little piece of the ancient text: mindfulness of body, of feelings, of mind, and of dharma. Let me talk about each of them as a

reflection for you.

Loving awareness of what is called the body in the body—not some idea, but the direct experience. Now, there are different ways we can approach our human body. One is we can fear for it, worry about it, grasp it, live with a kind of bodily anxiety. Another is we can dissociate from it and just go about our business, not caring about our bodies. If I were to ask, a lot of hands would go up on that side. It's the line from James Joyce that I often use: his character Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body. And you get one or the other, and you're out of touch.

But what happens is you're invited to meditate. And meditation isn't about becoming a good meditator. It's really a training to become present for your own life. As you sit, the invitation is to be with this body and to listen to it and learn from it. And so what you'll notice is that you sit and there are sensations of pleasure and pain. Anybody not have that? And they're not necessarily a mistake.

They're the body showing itself to you. They're part of it.

As you sit with those sensations, you can also begin to notice that if you resist the pain and contract around it, if you look closely, it lasts longer and you suffer more. But if you can receive the physical pain in your body with loving awareness and say, "Yes," just as you would hold a crying child—all right, I have this new grandson who's now three months old, so I've been doing a bunch of diaper changes and things like that. But once the kid is fed and diapered and whatever and they're still crying, what do you do? You hold them. You give that sense of holding, bodily care. And after a while, they kind of settle down.

In some way, that same loving awareness can be brought to this body, to the place that's hurt, to the tension that you carry because you go through the day and there are difficulties. Your jaw tightens and your shoulders get tight and your back, and then you sit. You're very quiet and easeful, and your body hurts. It's not because you're meditating wrong. It's saying, "Hey, remember me? You've tightened me. Now it's time for all this to release itself." It will release when you bring a loving awareness to it. It opens. It heals itself in some deep way.

So the question is, how do you touch this body? Do you touch it with fear or longing or love? There's something kind of beautiful and pure about bringing attention to the body without judgment. Without judgment.

And it's not an easy thing, because the whole culture is selling you how a body should look—the magazine cover ones that are done in the right light with makeup and then airbrushed on top of it, and Photoshop. I mean, that is nuts. And then we think, "Okay, I look in the mirror. I don't look like that. Something is wrong with me. I'm the wrong color. I'm the wrong size. My thighs are too thin or too thick, or my hair, what's left of it, isn't in the right place." The culture teaches us to judge our body rather than to love it.

This is a radical act. When the Buddha said there is a healing that takes place when you bring a loving awareness to the body—to that which is painful and also that which is joyful and beautiful—because the

body is an instrument of tremendous joy and ease. When you bring a good spirit into the body, the body can feel it and says, "Okay, you remembered me. You care for me." Even if the world is saying your body isn't cover material or whatever, your body's saying, "Oh yes, she did it." It feels the love.

Here's a different story, just for the fun of it. This is more the spirit of it, but I'm thinking about this also because I have some dear friends who've been in hospitals lately.

"I'm ninety-two years old. I get up every morning at seven a.m. Each day I remind myself: wake up, get up. I talk to my legs. 'Legs, get moving. Legs, you're an antelope.' It's a matter of mind over matter. You have to have the right spirit. I'm out on the street, seven-thirty a.m. sharp. I'm wearing my Honorable Sanitation Commissioner badge they gave me from City Hall. I'm alert, I'm ready, I'm out there. I got my whistle. My job is to help get parked cars off the streets so they can bring in the sanitation trucks and the Wayne broom—the big one, thirty grand for a broom. So when they show up, I go around blowing my whistle to get people to move their cars. I have a great time. People are asleep. They're busy with business. They're busy taking time off from the business. They're busy having a good time. They're busy not having a good time."

Whatever. I don't care. I blow my whistle. I'm all over the place. I don't discriminate either—I go after the sanitation men too. The union got them a coffee break, some coffee. They're having eggs, having bacon, having toast, having French toast. I kid them about it. Then I go right into the restaurant and blow my whistle. They love it. Everybody understands. It's the whistle that gets them. Sometimes I'm having such a laugh I can't even blow it, and then I get back to work. "Schleppers, get moving! We've got to clean the city."

This used to be a beautiful city. People cared. If you didn't pay your rent, the sheriff would come and put your furniture out on the street, but the poorest of the poor would come automatically and drop their pennies and nickels at your house, and put you back into your apartment. That's neighborhood. That's connection.

Now it's different. Things have gotten out of kilter. Hard to say why. People seem to be lost in their thoughts and their own lives. I see them on the streets. Not present. Not that I'm all that different—I'm a schlep myself. I have as many bad habits as anyone. You should see my apartment. Me, Mr. Clean. But I'm trying. Ninety-two and I'm still trying. It's all possible. What can I tell you? I'm not a saint or a wise man. I'm not the two-thousand-year-old man. I'm only ninety-two years old, just a senior citizen. But what do I know that everybody doesn't know? We know. I just go out there in the morning and blow my whistle. That's what I do. You do what you do. Me, I'm having a great time. Wonderful fun. And when people see how much fun I'm having, they have to laugh. What else can they do? And then I hit them with it: "Move your car."

There's something in this story about what it means to love your life. To listen as Yeshe Dunden does, but also to feel that the spirit of your life is part of inhabiting this human body—and to do it with mindful

loving awareness.

So close your eyes for a minute. Don't change your posture. Don't get weird about it. Just close your eyes.

It's all right. And it's just a simple reflection as you get quiet. What in your body wants to be listened to? What part of your body? It might be for healing or joy or attention. What does it have to say to you? And sense how you can be present for your body with its pleasures and its joys and its pains and its illness—all of the life of this body—with a free spirit, with attention and care and respect.

Now it turns out that this very same loving awareness of the body is also required for awareness of the body of the earth. Because it turns out your body isn't separate from the body of the earth. Every breath you take dusted Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa as it came over the Pacific, and also dusted the Fukushima nuclear reactor. It's the reality of it. And the water that you drink—the rainwater that comes—picks up the pollution in China or India or Europe or wherever it is, and carries it. We are completely interwoven.

And you don't want to get a little weirder, but the breath that you're breathing in this room, all those other people breathed before you. It's actually very intimate when you go, "That was what she just did with that breath, and him..." Kind of creepy, right? But the fact is that we are in it together. And the whole notion of separateness dissolves. So it's not just your body, it's the earth's body. And to be able to pay attention to your own physical body in the way that we talked about—that brings healing—it also brings healing to the earth itself.

I just came back from this conference, Wisdom 2.0, on technology and mindfulness, with a few thousand people from Silicon Valley and so forth. And of course, climate change was discussed. Some of the big problems were there on the stage: the problems with technology itself, the problems with climate change, the problem with continuing warfare and continuing racism and injustice and economic injustice. How do we tackle these things?

And the first thing, of course, is to see them clearly. Here are the problems. But then to begin to listen more deeply. Is there a way to hold them with mindfulness, with loving awareness, that allows us to respond differently?

A few months ago, when there was a big climate summit in San Francisco held by the state of California, we had a climate day here at Spirit Rock. A few of you might have come to it. I was up here in dialogue with a really remarkable woman named Cristiana Figueres, who is a diplomat from Costa Rica and has mostly been in Europe. She is, or was, the United Nations Special Representative for Climate Change. So she helped to organize the Rio summit, and then she organized the Paris climate meeting.

But she said that as she'd been doing her work, she was getting more and more depressed—partly because of the science showing how fast things are happening, partly also because of the actors (I guess they call them, like in a bad Shakespearean play) the bad actors, which were a lot of the big countries. And you know who is included in that, right? As Miss Piggy would say, "Moi?" Right, it's the U.S. She shared how

recalcitrant people were, how selfish really, in certain ways. So she was really depressed.

She told this story. Someone said to her, "You know what you need to do? You need to go to Plum Village." Plum Village is Thich Nhat Hanh's center, the great Vietnamese Zen master's place in southern France. So she went to Plum Village. She began to practice.

If any of you have ever been with Thich Nhat Hanh and seen him walk, it changes your life. Your body goes, "Whoa, that's what it means to walk mindfully." It's just intense and wonderful. He's so amazingly present. And then he sits down with this calm and very, very deep sense of presence and conversation. He embodies somehow what it means to be present on the earth.

She said she sat and she walked, and that already began to soothe her heart. And then she realized, as she listened to the teachings, she understood the very deep teachings of interdependence—that every breath and every drink of water and the earth that we walk on, that we're all in this together in a very different way than she had understood. And Thich Nhat Hanh, of course, gave to her through those practices a kind of revival of her spirit, helping her realize that there's another way of seeing all of this.

So she said, when I went back to the Paris Climate Accord, everyone was in their corner struggling, and the paradigm was the victims and the perpetrators—which countries were doing it to whom. And she said, "I was able to shift the narrative so that instead of victims and perpetrators, we talked about interdependence. And that shift in my own consciousness and the narrative allowed 148 countries to sign on to the Paris Climate Accord."

So you understand—like Yeshe Dunden feeling that pulse, or her going to Plum Village—that to begin to listen to the pulse of the earth, we respond in a different way.

This from Mary Oliver teaches us how to go to the woods:

Ordinarily, I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable. I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours. Besides, when I'm alone, I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing. If you've ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

This is really that same story of Yeshe Dunden. It's Mary Oliver, our great poet, talking about sitting there and feeling the pulse of life, and then using that love and understanding to make her art, to make her contribution to what allows us to reawaken and reimagine and live this world in a different way.

Oh, so many more things I could say about that, but all right.

The next dimension of mindfulness is mindfulness of feeling. As Don Juan says to Carlos Castaneda, "The most difficult part of the sorcerer's way is to realize that the world is a feeling."

Now that's a really mysterious statement, isn't it? What could he mean by that?

Well, William O. Douglas, Supreme Court Justice, said some years ago that at the Supreme Court where he worked, ninety-plus percent of decisions were based on how they felt about things. And the other ten percent was used to justify their feelings.

Our life revolves around feeling. It directs our love, our longing, our hate, our fear—all of those kinds of things. And the gift of loving awareness is that we can begin to actually know this domain of feelings and not just be caught up in them. Just like you don't have to be afraid of the pain in your body—or some people are so loyal to their suffering, they're afraid of the joy in their body; they don't know how to dance—in the same way, you can learn to tolerate and actually love all the feelings. The sadness and the grief and the longing and the loneliness. The joy and the excitement and the appreciation and the wonder. This whole river of feeling—I have a list of five hundred emotions that starts with affectionate and ambitious and aggressive and anguished and ambivalent and angry and amused and amorous and aversive and antagonistic and antsy and apathetic and apoplectic and anxious and appreciative and argumentative and adamant and addled and amazed and blissful, brokenhearted, bonkers, bored, bad, belligerent, brave.

You know, it's wild, the feelings.

C.S. Lewis says, "Within us is a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds." That's his way of looking at the dark side of it all.

But then we have this headline from the front of the Wall Street Journal: "So Young and So Many Pills"—about the tens of millions of prescriptions for young kids, ADHD medicine, antidepressants, and so forth. It's not that they don't have their value at times, but often it's just some little kid, some little boy or girl whose body is full of energy and who shouldn't be sitting at a desk all day long. You shouldn't either, actually, but that's another story. They just need to go out and run around and hang out with the trees and play. But okay, let's give them some meds and chill them out, make them a little more manageable.

The liberation that comes—neuroscience talks about expanding the window of tolerance—allows us to actually tolerate our humanity, our joys and sorrows, our anger and fear and longing and love. And when we receive them with a bow, we become the space that has a choice. Because without that, we are just thrown around by each feeling. We're like a boat without a rudder. But when you have established the sense of loving awareness, you can bear witness to the flood of feelings, and you can also choose which to respond to and how.

And when you meditate, they will come. You're just watching your own breath, right? And you feel all the tensions in your body, and your body says, "Remember me." And then the emotions come, and the unfinished business of the heart will come—the grief, the love that you haven't expressed, the creativity bubbling up in you, all those things. And your task is to make a space that knows them with loving

awareness, so that like Yeshe Dunden you are listening to the pulse of your own heart and your own psyche.

And this starts to bring a liberation.

First, because you see that we all have it. Anybody here never been depressed? I don't believe you. They didn't even try to raise their hand. You know, we've had them all. Anybody here not been lonely?

When we were in England, Trudy and I were in Parliament doing some teaching, and we got to talk to people. They had just appointed the Minister of Loneliness in England. I'm sure you read about that. And then we have a friend from Harvard Medical School who has something called the Unloneliness Project, to try to reconnect people with the world and one another. But this is it. This is human life. You have it. And you can either get lost in it and frightened, or with the liberation of loving awareness, you can allow yourself to be present for it, and not be afraid to weep and to feel the tears that we all carry. And also not to be afraid to be tender with the world, because it's your world.

The world is your lover in a way that almost nothing else is. It's always here. You can go out and kiss the Earth, really. The astronauts who were lost in space for a while—there were a couple of Russian astronauts at the International Space Station, and their capsule didn't work right, and there was a very good chance that they weren't going to make it back. They went through the fiery descent, and somehow they did manage to get back. They landed in Kazakhstan, and they got out of their space capsule and got down and literally kissed the dirt. They said, from up there, there's nothing more than you want than just to be back on this earth. To see this blue earth and know everything you care about comes out of it, and to return.

So this is the body of the earth, but it's also emotions and feelings. There's a deep healing that comes when you can weep your tears and feel your joy, and stay present for it. And allow yourself to feel the trauma that you carried. And at the same time, know that it's not the end of the story. Because it isn't. You have suffered and you will suffer more. It's part of being a human being, just as you will have joy. That's the game.

And the Sufis say, overcome any bitterness because you are not up to the magnitude of pain that was entrusted to you. Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, you are each part of her heart and therefore each called upon to hold your measure of cosmic pain. You are called upon to meet it with compassion instead of self-pity. Instead of saying, oh poor me—it's like we're in this together, and you can hold this life with the great heart of compassion.

There's something so mysterious about it, all of this.

Let your eyes close again without moving. And let yourself know what it is that is true in your heart and your feelings that wants your loving attention. The unbearable beauty of the world, the ocean of tears. And know that you can hold it all with loving awareness. Like that famous Ojibwe phrase: sometimes I go

about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky.

It's really a conversation with the heart, a deep listening. And it's this capacity that allowed Nelson Mandela to transform the suffering of twenty-seven years in prison and come out with such magnanimity and compassion, changed South Africa and the world. That allowed Wangari Maathai in prison to come out and finish inspiring people to plant fifty million trees in the Greenbelt and Nairobi and around. It's your capacity to hold all of your human feelings and not take them so personally. You're going to have them all. And they don't define you. They actually become the energy of your life.

So body and feelings, liberation with feelings, liberation with the mind, the thoughts. Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you more than your own mind untrained. Not even the worst enemy. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than your own mind trained.

Not even the most loving partner or parents or family.

This is the deal. You have this mind. And the wonderful thing with mindfulness and loving awareness is that with the mind, you can observe the mind. As Muriel Rukeyser, the great poet, said, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." It is the way we see it and tell ourselves that it is that leads our life. And you can begin to see the stories that are told in there. They can be stories of defeat. They can be superhero, fantastic stories. They can be stories of the great mother or the prodigal son or the noble defeated activist. We have a million stories that we tell about ourselves. All of them are kind of limited in a way, because they're only stories, and you can't be limited to a story.

Remember what Mark Twain said: "My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." You see, that's how the fearful mind works, because fear is about something that hasn't happened yet.

I had the pleasure of sitting with Jerry Brown some weeks ago at a party for one of our mutual friends, a really remarkable person. We were sitting at the table with a few folks, and I asked him what he was going to do when he retires. It's in the papers—he's going to go to his grandfather's ranch up in the foothills of the Sierras. He said, "Nobody's going to bother me. They only care about you when you have power. When you're out, they just don't care." He said, "So it's going to be fine."

I asked about legacy, beside all he's done, because he has done a lot of very wonderful things. He said, "Well, I'm concerned about two things. I'm concerned about climate change, and I want to do what I can about that because it's really important. The other thing I'm concerned about is nuclear weapons." This was even before we pulled out of that treaty. He said there are fourteen thousand nuclear warheads around the world, and they're in all these different places. He's on the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists that has that little doomsday clock—two minutes to midnight or whatever. So he's really concerned. He said, "But I don't know what to do. People aren't paying attention to it, and we have to do something."

I thought about it and I reflected. Then I said, "I want to tell you a story."

In ancient India, the gods create the world. Brahma is the creator god, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the destroyer in the Hindu pantheon. Universes get created for an eon or a billion eons, and then they dissolve, and then a new one is created out of nothing. That's how it works. If you haven't noticed, everything is created out of nothing. It really is. And then it disappears into nothing.

What happened to Y2K? What happened to 2018? It disappeared into the void. What happened to this morning's breakfast? Well, that's still in there. But what happened to yesterday or last week or January? It's just gone. It's wild. Stuff appears. Life appears. And then it disappears.

So the gods created the world. And when the world is created, it's both gods and demons. You may have noticed that. There's some balance of good and evil and joy and sorrow and light and dark and birth and death. It's duality to create life. If you have birth, you have death. Everything with its opposite. And then there are the battles between the gods and the demons. But in this particular universe that had been created, the demons were winning.

And the gods tried everything, but the demons had more power and were winning. Finally, one of the gods said, "All right, all right, we've done all that we can. We have to call Durga."

Durga is the goddess, the mother of Kali, if you've heard of Kali. In Calcutta there's a great temple to her—she's the one who wears the necklace of skulls. Kali is beautiful, you know. And that's just one of her children.

So they called Durga. And out of the Himalayan mountains she appeared, with many arms. In each arm, some weapon, some skillful means. She went right toward the demons. It took her a while to clean house, as she did. But unlike all the others who had tried, she eventually not only defeated the demons, but also removed their fire from the world.

And so I said to Jerry, "Maybe all the men that have been working on these weapons, and all the men who've been trying to stop this, don't have the answer. Maybe it's time to call the mothers. Maybe it's time for the mothers and the grandmothers to come out. Maybe there's some whole other energy of life that can save us in a way that men haven't been able to do."

I tell you this story, and I also have to say I was very pleased, because I'd been thinking, what can a contemplative say to someone in the political world? But it felt like it actually had a kind of wisdom in it. Got lucky, whatever.

But what you can hear in this story is how limited we are by our stories—our personal stories and our collective stories. The collective stories right now include stories about economic justice, climate change, the problems we face, tribalism, continuing conflict, racism. Some of them are really crazy stories, but we've been repeating them for generations and we're locked into them. And we do that within ourselves as well.

The healing comes when we can step back personally and begin to look at what the stories actually are. And then, as the Dalai Lama says, some of these stories do not have my best interest in mind. Some of these thoughts—some of them are really creative ones, and some may be not so creative, those repeated patterns. By becoming loving awareness, you are no longer lost in the thoughts. You actually have a choice.

So close your eyes for a moment. You don't have to move. With loving awareness, let yourself become aware of what are the predominant stories that you tell about yourself and about the world. Do you take them seriously? Do you really believe them? Because they're only partial truths, you know. This is not about fighting, but becoming the healing space of the heart. Feel that healing awareness that can hold it all.

As Thomas Merton writes, "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence beyond thought that is a fountain of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all creation."

As you see the thoughts, also begin to rest in the silence—loving awareness, the vastness that is your true nature, that can know the mind without getting lost in it, without being so identified. Perhaps, again going back to the image of Yeshe Dunden, you can feel what it's like to listen in to your own mind with that same respectful and careful attention. Not judging, but making the space of loving awareness to say, "Oh yes, this is the conditioning, these are the things that have repeated, this is what I've learned, this is what appears, this is healthy, this is not so helpful."

Because your heart knows things that your mind can't know. Your heart knows what's healthy and what's wise for you in ways that you can't think your way out of.

The last of the foundations of mindful loving awareness is mindfulness of the Dharma—a word that means the truth, the way things are, the laws of the universe. This is really at the center of the awakening that's offered through mindfulness. To find a place within reality, within our experience, that can see suffering and joy, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, birth and death arising as they do. Because this is what human incarnation offers you. To become the great heart of compassion and spacious wisdom that says yes.

Remember when you read *Siddhartha* in high school, and it ended with him, after his love affair with Kamala and all those experiences, sitting by the river, seeing all the different voices of joy and sorrow and gain and loss? And being finally at ease as all of the river went by. He allowed it all to pass through him in some way, but he didn't bind himself or get caught in one or another perspective, one or another of those voices. And then, as I believe the translation says, all of a sudden it became a kind of harmony.

And it wasn't the harmony where you don't care, or where you don't go out and mend the places that need mending, or stand up for justice. But you do it in a really different way. You do it because it's your family.

It's your earth. It's your children. Not because you're angry at anybody, but because you know better. Because it's you. And it comes from a place of love. And love is really the only thing that has the power to truly make a difference in this world.

So this is a shift of identity. A bear paced up and down the twenty-foot length of its cage. When, after fifteen years, the cage was removed to give the bear a bigger, open place to live, the bear continued to pace up and down the twenty feet as if the cage were still there. We can live in a kind of conditioned way. Our small sense of self, our thoughts are the way we define ourselves. But it's not who you are.

When you go in the bathroom or bedroom and look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? Face it. You're losing fur here, you're getting extra fur there, you're drooping over there. It's just what bodies do. But the strange thing is that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? And you think, *Wow, look at that. Look at what it's become now. It's wrinkled over there and drooping that way.* Whatever. And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body is born as an infant and a small child and an adolescent and a young adult and older and older, and then it starts to fall apart, and then it dies and goes back to the earth in one form or another. What bodies do.

But in that moment you say, "I don't feel older. Interesting how it's aging now. It's lost that." As our colleague Wes Nisker says, "The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard." That's his description. But anyway, what's true in that moment is you become the witness of it. You realize that it's not who you are. That who you are is the spirit that was born into this body—and that will also leave in that mysterious moment of death. You'll see. You wait and see.

So with deep listening, instead of possessing things, you shift your identity, and you become instead the loving awareness itself. You rest in the consciousness. My teacher, Ajahn Chah, once went to the greatest master of the time to tell him about all his meditation experiences—the lights and visions and samādhi and so forth. And the master looked back and said, "Chah, you missed the point. Those are just experiences. They're like movies—a war movie and a romantic comedy and a documentary and a superhero movie." He said, "They're just movies. The only question is: to whom do they happen? Who is witnessing or seeing all this? Turn your attention back and become the one who knows the knowing. Become the awareness itself." And that is your gateway to freedom.

"How nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. You are fundamentally free. You have a fundamental dignity and nobility that no one can take from you. And this is called the laughter of the wise, which says, "Yeah, it's quite a dance." And we suffer at times, it's true, and we love and we let go and all those things. But from this place of wisdom, we say, "Oh, this is really a dance of life." And rather than holding on to it, we can see it for what it is and rest in the place of witnessing, of loving awareness.

You are the loving awareness that was born into you.

We can rest in the great heart of compassion. Not because we're supposed to, but because it's our home. There's something in each of us that longs for freedom. And that freedom isn't found in the Himalayas or in some Zen temple or wherever you can imagine it might be. There's only one place where it can be found, and that is within your own heart.

Mary Oliver again, to end:

What can I say that I've not said before? So I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there's an unfinishable story and you are somewhere in it and it will never end until all ends. Take your busy heart to the art museum and the chamber of commerce, but take it also to the forests and the hills. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still.

I am of years lived so far—seventy-four—and the hills and the leaf are singing still.

It's such a gift to be able to quiet ourselves, to learn meditation. Not to become a meditator, but to get real, to become a full human being with that great heart of compassion that was born in you, with your original dignity, and with the invitation of freedom in the midst of it all. That's a true wonder for us.

This is really a reminder to you that there is a way to live. You can think about Thich Nhat Hanh taking a walk, and all of a sudden you realize, "Oh, this is what it's like to walk on this earth and be present." It will serve you. It will serve the people you love. It will serve the things that you care about, and all of us.

So I appreciate your being here. This is now one of your places. Even if you were here for the first night, you can come back anytime and walk the hills, listen to the leaves, and practice with us.

Thank you, and good night.

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