The Wisdom of the One Who Knows

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:07:43

Please let yourself sit in a way that's comfortable and at ease, and listen in a kind of meditative practice of listening. For more than anything, the teachings are a reminder of things that you already know to be true. And if they do remind you, excellent. And if they seem off-base, then throw them out.

The Dharma is a compound, complex word that means all kinds of related things. It means the truth, it means the path of awakening, the teachings—all kinds of things. The gates of the Dharma are open and welcome everyone. Whatever your background, whatever your race, whatever your caste, whatever your sexual orientation, whatever your ability, whatever identity you take—that's kind of the outer stuff, and all of that's welcome here. But more than anything, it welcomes your good hearts and that which you know inside. It's a place of reminder to that.

Last night I was part of a dialogue on stage at Stanford for a big crowd with Tim Ryan, who just last week decided to drop out of the presidential race. I think there were just too many people and he wasn't getting the numbers. He's a good guy. He'd written a book called *Mindful Nation* about the power of meditation and mindfulness to change education and healthcare and all kinds of things that we know from modern neuroscience. It's helpful. He gave a copy to everyone in Congress. On stage I said, "So Tim, did any of them read it?" He said, "No." I said, "Well, do you have anything to tell us? Now that you're not on the campaign trail, can you say some real things?"

And he said, "Yeah, I want to start with something for you. I've been for the last eleven months going around the country, especially certain states—Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, various other places as well. And I just want you to know that you're not alone in your anxiety, in your concern, and in your suffering." He spoke of people who are worried economically, people who feel the weight of economic disparity, people who are suffering because of the increased hostility in the discourse, people who are suffering because of racism, people who can't get healthcare, people who are suffering because the education system isn't really working for their children. He went on and on. He said, "There's a lot of struggle out there, and don't think that it's you. Because it's not. It's us. And the only way that something is going to get changed to really make it healthy for us as human beings is if we can somehow find a way to do it together."

I found that to be very moving.

Then he said the meditation practice he used on the road from one campaign stop to another was more than anything a compassion practice. He did a Tibetan form of compassion called Tonglen, where you breathe in the suffering of the people that you meet and know and sense, and breathe out compassion and

love. He said that was the only thing that kept him sane. So it was very moving actually.

And again, the way of the Dharma is to see things as they are, to speak what's true, to see things deeply.

My dear friend Robert Hall, who was one of the founding teachers at Spirit Rock—a physician and the founder of Lomi training, body and mind therapies over many decades—died a few weeks ago. We'll have a memorial here on the twenty-fourth of November. I was thinking about the Robert stories I was going to tell at the memorial, and one of the most striking ones for me was this: We had a men's retreat. We did ten years of running men's retreats, and in the evening after people sat and walked all day, we would have a circle of men sit in the middle. There were topics like fathers and sons, or men and money, or sexual history. All of them had a lot of confusion and suffering in them. What does it mean to be a man? Nobody quite knew.

At one point in one of those circles, a man raised his hand, looked at Robert and said, "I don't feel safe."

Robert took a breath, looked back at him, and said, "You're not."

And actually, that's our human condition. We could try to make it safe and do things in appropriate ways to take care of ourselves. But the reality is that we're never really safe from change. We're never really safe from things—pleasure and pain changing, gain and loss. It could change like that. And he just looked at him and said, "This is the way that it is. Now, knowing this, can you speak from your heart and say what's true for you?"

So these are reminders, if you will, of things that we know and need to remember.

And meditation, which we just did together for a time, is not in order to become a good meditator or a good breather. You already breathe fine. It's called insight meditation, and insight meditation means that as we quiet the mind and open or tend the heart, it becomes possible to see the way that life is with a sense of wisdom and connection and a freedom of spirit in the midst of it all.

It invites a shift of identity from the small sense of self that's self-absorbed—what's called the body of fear, which we all have—to realize that that's not who you really are. That's part of your personality, and you can adopt it and take it for a walk and be nice to it, but that's not your true identity.

What happens as we meditate, if you have a meditation practice, is you expand what the neuroscientists call the window of tolerance for life, for your capacity to be present with the losses and gains and fears and hopes and pleasures and pains that make up your life. More and more, you begin to be able to trust—trust that awareness itself can hold all of this, your awareness. And you can trust that your own heart, the great heart of compassion that was born in you, is big enough to hold this world. You learn to do it by sitting still and then having to bear witness to everything that's there.

This awakening that happens as you practice, my teacher Ajahn Chah called awakening the one who knows—awakening that wisdom in ourselves. And it has a couple of dimensions. One is a timeless

dimension of the witnessing of all things. And one is a wisdom dimension that actually engages in the world.

The timeless dimension: You are consciousness. It was born into your body. It will leave your body. You'll be surprised when it leaves. Wow, that was quite an incarnation, wasn't it? You'll see. And in the timeless dimension, when you rest in awareness, things appear and disappear, but who you are is not affected by the arising and passing of things. There's a sense, rather, that you rest in the present, eternity, the vastness of space. Things appear and disappear on the screen, but who you are is the witness to all of it.

One way to understand this that I like to talk about is when you look in the mirror and you notice you've aged. It starts to sag and droop and wrinkle and either lose its fur certain places or get more fur other places. It does all kinds of weird stuff, as teacher Wes here says. The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard, and it's just—okay, this is aging. But the weird thing is you don't necessarily feel older. You know what that's like? You look in the mirror and think, oh, hmm, wrinkling and drooping, but you don't feel that. That's because in that moment you're becoming the witness of the body. You look and say, oh, look what's happening to it. There's a place of awareness that can see what's there without being so identified with it, sort of stepping outside to take a look. How's it going? Oh, it's this age now. This is what's happened to it. But you're the conscious awareness of it all. Does this make sense? That simple.

When my twin brother died a few years ago—and I've talked about this once or twice before in these past few years—he was a scientist, a very creative scientist. A geneticist and a population biologist and a world explorer. He was a member of the Explorers Club. He did all kinds of amazing underwater genetic studies in the great lakes of the world—like Titicaca in the Andes, and Lake Baikal in Siberia, and Lake Malawi in Africa, where he spent a year in the water doing research. He did all kinds of other stuff too.

Anyway, there he was, and he was dying, and we were talking about it. I asked him, "You know, you belong to the Explorers Club. It has people who went to the South Pole and the North Pole and the Moon. Do they allow inner explorers?" He said, "No." He was definitely an outer explorer kind of guy. I said, "Well, what do you think happens when you die?" And he said, "I'm a scientist. You go back to dirt. It all comes from your brain." I said, "Well, that's an interesting thought. But a lot of people in the world don't believe it." And I talked about my out-of-body experiences and past life memories, all kinds of stuff. I said, "So when you die, you know, it might not be what you think."

I wondered, could I teach him meditation? No, way too late for that. Besides, you have to want it anyway.

But then at some point I said, "I'll tell you what. Just to let you know how it works for me, I'm going to meditate with you, but I'm going to meditate out loud."

So I was sitting with him—he was lying down, as I recall—and it was not that many days before he died. I closed my eyes and said, "I just want to get quiet," which I did for a while, tuning in with presence, because we're twins also, so it was very close. "And notice with mindful awareness, loving awareness,

what's happening." I said, "I can feel my breath. My body's quieting."

I opened my eyes again and gazed at him. "Oh, all of a sudden I feel this wave of icy cold come into my body, and it's mostly in my genitals and my pelvis. It's like ice, and it's pretty intense." Then I said, "That's death. And it's beginning to take over your body." It just came to me.

He said, "So what do you do?"

I said, "Oh, you pay attention to it. Because it's opening and changing." Then I said, "Oh, my attention is now moving up to my chest and the area of my heart. And it's getting all warm, as opposed to that icy part. And I feel this radiance of love—that we've loved each other from back when we were in the womb, and maybe lifetimes before that. And it's so strong. It feels like it doesn't matter whether you're here in body or not. It's just our connection. It's how it is."

I sat quietly further and said, "Oh, now my attention has shifted up to my head. But I don't have a head. It's like if I close my eyes and feel, it's more like space and silence." I said, "This is the place where I meditate quite a lot. It's a place of vastness and stillness and awareness that can be aware of birth and death, pleasant and unpleasant, experiences appearing—but it's not limited by any of that. It's the timeless awareness. It's consciousness, which is what we are. And I'm just going to rest in this for a time."

"You may find this when you die. You may discover you leave your body, float out, there's light, there's a little life review. 'Wow, what an incarnation that one was!' You're a scientist, so you have to keep a little bit of an open mind. And if it happens, remember—I told you so."

This is the timeless wisdom of the one who knows. It's the one from Juan Ramón Jiménez's poem: "the one who remains standing when you die." It's that spirit that was born into you—spacious, luminous, silent, and mysterious. It's filled with love and appreciation. It has all these qualities of gratitude, but it's vast.

Aldous Huxley says an idolatrous religion is one that substitutes time for eternity. And it's really an invitation to step out of the drama of our life and ask, "Who are we really?" That's the timeless witness. And you can practice in meditation as the awareness itself, the loving awareness, resting in awareness and noticing the play of experience, beginning more and more to trust this openness.

Now, the second dimension of the one who knows I would call the wisdom dimension. Your capacity to be present and to have this timeless witnessing now lets you look at human incarnation and say, "Well, what are the rules? What is this that I've got?" Because yes, you're timeless awareness, but you're more than that, aren't you? As Ram Dass says, you have to remember your Buddha nature *and* your social security number. You've got these different dimensions of your life.

And so you start to see the rules of human incarnation, because you quiet the mind and open the heart in some way.

He writes about meeting a Zen master forest ranger out in the woods on a beautiful hike one day. He said

he was hiking, and there was this young woman who was a forest ranger. She asked him, "Do you have any questions?" He said she was cute, so he flirted and said, "Are time and space real?" She looked back at him and said, "What you love is real," and turned away. He said, "Okay, I met the Zen master today in the form of a forest ranger." He was being a smart aleck, and she really took it up a notch. What you love is real.

So the wisdom dimension of the one who knows sees the impermanence of things. It sees that what matters in the end is not so much holding on to things, but that things change and that life is short—and therefore all the more precious.

A poem for you, by Kay Ryan, called "The Niagara River":

As though the river were a floor, we position our chairs and tables upon it, eat and have conversation. As it moves along, we notice—as calmly as through dining room paintings, and as though dining room paintings were being replaced—the changing scenes along the shore. We do know that this is the Niagara River, but it's hard to remember what that means.

It's a kind of intense poem, isn't it? And yet it's also very real. It's the one who knows, the wisdom part, that's saying: What is this game of life? It's short. It changes. You can't hold on to things.

Here's another poem:

My friends, let's grow up. Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here. Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice. Look, everything that can be lost will be lost. It's simple. How could we have missed it for so long? Let's grieve our losses fully like ripe human beings. Love fully and let them go. But please, let's not be so shocked by them. Let's not act so betrayed. Impermanence is life's only promise to us. To a child, she seems cruel. But she's only wild. And her compassion, exquisite. Brilliantly penetrating, luminous with truth. She strips away the unreal to leave us with what is real—which is consciousness itself, which is who we are.

So the one who knows somehow doesn't paper over the way things are, but sees: this is the game. And it allows you actually to be more courageous, more honest and straightforward, and to have a different set of values. Because if you only had a few weeks to live, or a month or two or three, what would you do? Who would you call? What would you say? Why do you wait?

The one who knows, in the space of loving awareness, also allows you to become more comfortable with the paradox of human incarnation. The Heart Sutra begins with the lines: *Form is not different than emptiness. Emptiness is not different than form.* This is the expression of the mystery in another language. Things appear and they disappear. They are fundamentally empty. Where is your childhood? Where is 2018? Where is Y2K?

Where is whatever happened last month, or yesterday, or this morning? It went back into the void where

it came from. And the only place to find it is back with the pyramids and the dinosaurs. It's gone. That is really wild, this incarnation. Things appear and then they're gone. This is called emptiness. Check it out. We think it's also solid. Come on, take a look. Form is not different than emptiness. This is who we are.

And so there is the sense of vastness. And yet with the vastness, there also comes a tenderness, a courage to say: Things are only here once like this. There's no day that can be repeated. Nothing can be repeated. It's always some variation, something new. What does it mean to honor this? To love it and also to be open to the next thing. And to see that form and emptiness, praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death—those are the dualities that make up incarnation. It's how it is. And that's what makes up a human life. Instead of thinking you did it wrong, or you have pain, or things disappear, or there's suffering because you're doing it wrong—it's just how duality works. And it's part of who you are in the incarnation form that you've taken.

This from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist and very powerful voice for freedom, writing out of the Gulag archipelago of Siberia when he was in prison. He says: "If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

So you start to see that you contain everything. You do. This is what mind is. It contains all these possibilities and all the roles that you take. We are men of parts, says Shakespeare. We have all these roles—and women of parts—in this world. And so in this, the one who knows is not like, "Okay, let's do the spiritual bypass and just make everything calm." You actually have to be present for the life.

In the monastery, we not only had the vastness, but we also had these exquisite rituals—like you'd see in a Zen temple—how you pour the water, how you fold your robes. Everything was cared for.

A story for you. In one of the great forests in Africa, a dark forest called the Forest Dukaduk. It was that dark at night, and scary. The name Dukaduk was actually the sound your heart made when you went into it.

There was a village, and one young man who had a number of cows had secretly found a clearing in the forest where he would take them. There was beautiful green grass for the cows to be nourished. But then his milk cows, at one point, started to lose their milk. Not all of it, but less than they should have produced in that beautiful green grass. Someone was stealing the milk.

So he decided—dukaduk as his heart was beating—that he would go at night and wait and see what was happening in that forest and who was stealing the milk from his beautiful cows. He hid behind a tree and waited for hours until the moon came out, and a beautiful young woman carrying a large basket that was sealed to carry liquid rode a moonbeam down from the heavens. She milked the cows, filled her basket, and headed back up into the sky.

Astonished by this, he—as in all these kinds of stories, you know how it works—came back another time and set a little trap, a rope or something, and caught this young woman. He demanded to know who she was. She said her people were sky maidens, and they lived in the sky. But they didn't have milk there. It was her job to take this beautiful milk and bring it back to the other people in the sky. She pleaded to be set free, promising to do whatever he asked.

And he agreed. He said, "I will set you free, but only if you marry me." You know how these things work in the fairy tales, right?

So she agreed. She went home, and some days later came back carrying a beautiful wooden box with her. She said, "I will be your wife. We will have a happy marriage, but you must promise never to look inside this box."

Well, uh-oh.

And for months the couple were happy together, but one day while his wife was out, curiosity got the best of him and he looked inside the box. To his surprise, he discovered nothing inside.

When the sky maiden returned, she saw his face and she knew. "You looked inside the box, didn't you?" We know, you know. The one who knows is checking things out, right? She was devastated and a tear trickled down her cheek. She said, "I'm sorry, I can't live with you any longer."

"Why? Why?" And he began to cry. "What's so terrible about my peeking into an empty box?"

"I'm not leaving because you opened the box," said the young woman. "I'm leaving because you said it was empty. It wasn't empty. It was full of space and sky, full of light and air and the vastness of the place that I come from, full of openness. When I went back to the sky village the last time before we married, I opened the box and filled it with what was precious to me—the openness and vastness that's precious to me. How can I be your wife when what is most precious to me is not clear to you, is emptiness but not the right kind of emptiness, meaningless to you?"

And sadly, as these stories go, she went back up to join her people.

We are wedded to emptiness. It's true. We are wedded to impermanence. We are wedded to the fact that things don't last. This is our mortal dilemma, if you will. And yet, we actually have to tend it and love it. As a poet wrote: "No matter what we are and who, some duties everyone must do. A poet puts aside his wreath to wash his face and brush his teeth. And even earls must comb their curls. And even kings have underthings."

And this is it, you know. It's both empty and yet at the same time—or ephemeral, ever-changing—and at the same time, here we are. We have this remarkable life, the unique one that we're given. The one who knows sees this and becomes comfortable with the paradox of life, with both vastness and the tenderness to care for things.

The one who knows also knows that happiness isn't found by collecting and grasping things. The noble truths of the Buddha, which Tim Ryan was really talking about: There is suffering in life. Not that life is suffering, but it has suffering. Anybody not have that? Please raise your hand. I want to meet you. And human suffering increases the more greed, hatred, and ignorance there is. Those are the causes of human suffering—grasping and greed and hatred and fear and ignorance. Those cause our suffering.

But it's not the end of the story. There is a freedom that can be found as we let go of greed and hatred and ignorance. And then there comes a happiness that's not dependent on owning things. You all know this. It's fine to have some money and it's fine to have a job, and these things give you meaning. But you and I both know—I know some people who are incredibly wealthy who are unhappy. And I know people in refugee camps where I've been who had nothing and yet possessed an amazingly joyful spirit. Because happiness is really a matter of heart.

Socrates said he loved to go to the marketplace to see all the things he was happy without—window shopping, I think they call it, or something like that. And Thoreau put it this way: he said men go fishing without understanding that it's not fish they're after. It's not the fish, but the stillness and the openness and the presence of life.

So meditation isn't about some grim duty. It's a willingness to find the happiness in yourself. As Guillaume Apollinaire says, now and then it's good to pause in your pursuit of happiness and just be happy. Not for a reason, but because you are here in this marvelous world. And then you tend to it and care for it and all those things, but you don't do it in a depressed way. I assure you, when you go to a refugee camp, people don't want you to come in depressed and weeping and gnashing your teeth. It doesn't help them a lot. They're actually more interested in those who carry some joy, who can meet that in them.

I remember talking with my daughter, who is—as we fortunate people are, sometimes our children are wiser than we are—quite lovely. It was a bit more than a decade ago when I was in the middle of a very sad and painful divorce, which happened in part because my ex-wife and I are so much opposites and different. She's profoundly introverted and quiet, and I have—how do we say it—a big life of people and travel and all these things. We're just at opposite ends of the spectrum. And after especially after my daughter left, it was like we were in just different worlds. She said she didn't want that, you know, and it takes two to stay married. So, sadly, because I'm a loyal person, but that's how it was.

We went through getting a divorce, and I sat down with my daughter one day and I said, "Caroline, your parents are getting divorced. You're twenty-four, twenty-five years old. They're still your mommy and daddy, right? I know it's hard. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?"

And she said, "Yeah, dad. Be happy." She said two things: "Dad, first, be happy."

It's a fantastic thing to say. Our children actually want to see us be happy, and it changes them to know that that's possible.

I said, "Yes, and the second thing?"

"Get the damn divorce over with. Get on with your life."

I could have paid her. Now she's a lawyer. She does this wonderful asylum law for Oasis Legal Services in Berkeley, with a bunch of other hotshot Berkeley lawyers, for LGBTQ people whose lives are in danger from around the world. She'll get a gay man from Uganda who'd be stoned to death. She had a transgender woman from Saudi Arabia who came to a different kind of Mecca—you know, the Castro or whatever. She has all these people come who've had—I don't even need to say—who've suffered incredible abuse or loss or rape, torture, all those kinds of things. And her work is to get them asylum and help. She and her lawyers win ninety-nine percent of their cases. So it's like, go girl.

But anyway, she was wise. And this is what's possible for you, says the Buddha. Live in joy even among those who are troubled or who are sick or in difficulty. Live with joy and a peaceful heart. You can do this, and it makes a difference to yourself. It's an act of courage. And it makes a difference to the life you live and those around you. It doesn't mean you don't see the grief and weep the tears you need to.

The one who knows sees how much we need each other—the inescapable mutuality, the single garment of destiny that Martin Luther King talked about. And again, Tim Ryan was saying, listen, climate change, racism, economic injustice, the bankrupt parts of our electoral system, either because of all the money pouring in or voter suppression—he said these will not be fixed by one problem being solved or one segment solved. We have to do this together, and we need each other in some very deep way.

It's a great mistake, says David Whyte, to act the drama as if you were alone, as if life were a progressive and cunning crime with no witnesses to the tiny hidden transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Put down the weight of your loneliness and ease into the conversation.

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

We need each other. And there's a deep sense—you know what Chief Seattle said: we are all connected. For if all the beasts were gone, men would surely die from a great loneliness of spirit. What happens to the beasts happens to humankind. We know this in our hearts.

The one who knows in us sees all of this. And we're asked to both hold it in the great heart of compassion, which is part of that vastness, and to say, "Yes, we won't turn away, we won't deny this. And we will do what we can together to make a difference."

The one who knows sees with the eyes of the beloved. Mother Teresa says the problem with us is that we draw our family circle too small. In most other cultures where I've lived—in many places around the world—the common parlance for speaking of others in Africa and Asia and Latin countries is family

honorifics: auntie, uncle, brother, sister, grandmother. They're all seen as relatives. And you know, when you go way back, some of you have pirates back there. You know you do. Some of you have been pirates in this life, but we won't go there for the moment.

Ram Dass says, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." You know how it works.

But the one who knows sees, as Thomas Merton did, the Christian mystic walking down the street in Louisville. There's this great government plaque commemorating his mystical experience. He said, "I saw the secret beauty in the eyes of everyone passing. If only they could see each other as they are—they're shining." He said the big problem was that he wanted to bow down and worship each one as they went by.

Here's a story from a Spirit Rock practitioner. Last year she disembarked from a flight at Kuala Lumpur Malaysian Airport. She groaned upon walking into a mammoth customs area. The place was packed, the lines stretched as far as one could see. The air conditioning was on the fritz. She realized this was going to be a very lengthy, hot shuffle that would only end with a standard stamp and dismissal from a disinterested or borderline hostile customs officer.

"What a drag this is going to be," she whined for some minutes as she scanned the whole arena. "I'll be here for hours." Finally, heaving a sigh, she started chanting metta for herself: "May I be safe, healthy, happy, free from worry." And as she did, she began to notice the people around her. Some appeared impatient and put out like herself, but there were unconcerned little children having fun and teasing. She saw colorful faces and bodies and clothing representing cultures from all over the world. And she began to spread the metta, saying metta for them and wishing the best for each one on their journey. "Metta for you, and you, and you. Metta for the whole lot of us in here."

She went on and on for an hour or two. Still chanting inwardly, she eventually approached the station. Her turn came to face a tired-looking, mustached clerk as she placed her passport on the counter. He glanced at her, scanned and stamped her document, and looked her in the eyes as he slid the passport back. "What a fine photograph. You have a wonderful smile," he beamed in his Malaysian-accented English. "Welcome to Malaysia." She felt like she was walking on air all the way to baggage claim.

So this is the one who knows—that says we're in this together. We all have our suffering and we all have our magnificent beauty. And why not love each other? Why not see with the eyes of compassion and recognize that we are connected?

And it doesn't take long. Five minutes of metta on BART or the Metro, or in busy traffic wishing well to all those other cars. By the way, you are traffic too. And they're thinking of you that way. So don't think it's just them—you are part of the problem, right? But it changes things to do that. And the one who knows realizes this is true.

The one who knows recognizes that in the entire galaxy—and in fact, in the entire universe, with its

billion, bazillion galaxies, with now we understand a bazillion planets out there, and who knows what kinds of life forms—there's never been anybody like you. Isn't that amazing? Life can say, "Okay, I'm going to make something new that I've never made before, and it's really weird, and let's see what happens with it." And it's you.

So you can't imitate it. You can be inspired, and I'm certainly inspired by models and teachers and people that mean a lot to me, that I resonate with, that I learn from. But I remember—because I'm in the spiritual industry, right, so I get to hang out with swamis and mamas and lamas and gurus and masters and whatever. They're not always quite how they're advertised, but anyway... that's another issue. We'll do that another night.

What is true is that I find myself at these conferences, and there's Eckhart Tolle and Ram Dass and Adyashanti and Ammachi and all these different lamas and the Dalai Lama. And I could look and say, "Gosh, am I anywhere near as enlightened as these people? How do we compare? Could I be like that person?" Useless. I could never be the Dalai Lama or Eckhart Tolle or Ammachi. Bless them all. And I don't think I'd want to be.

If you ever saw it, there's a wonderful movie about the life of Wavy Gravy called *Saint Misbehavin'*—it's about all the great stuff he's done. And at one point, toward the end of the film, he's sitting in front of his altar in the morning, meditating, and then he bows, and he makes a kind of prayer. He says, "Dear Goddess"—whoever he prays to—"I pray that I may be the best Wavy Gravy that there is." There's something really touching about it, because he's not trying to be anybody else. And however weird you are, he's matched you and doubled it, so it's okay.

This is from my dear friend Ed Brown, who is the author of *The Tassajara Bread Book* and *Cookbook*, and one of the Zen masters at San Francisco Zen Center over the years:

"When I first started cooking at Tassajara, I had a problem. I couldn't get my biscuits to come out the way they were supposed to. I'd follow the recipe, try variations, but nothing worked. The biscuits just didn't measure up. Growing up, I'd made two kinds of biscuits. One was from Bisquick and the other from Pillsbury. For the Bisquick, you add milk to the mix, then blob the dough in spoonfuls on the pan. You didn't even need to roll them out. The biscuits from Pillsbury came in a kind of cardboard can. If you whack it on the corner of the counter, it pops open, you twist the can, and put the pre-made biscuits on a pan and bake them. I really liked those Pillsbury biscuits. Isn't that what biscuits should taste like? Mine were not coming out right."

It's wonderful and amazing, the ideas of how we think life should be.

"People who ate my biscuits would extol their virtues, but to me, these perfectly good biscuits just weren't right. Finally, one day after meditating, came a revelation: Not right compared to what? Oh my word—I've been trying to make canned Pillsbury biscuits! Then came the moment of actually tasting my own biscuits

without comparing them to some previous idea. They were wheaty, flaky, buttery, sunny, earthy, real—all those Zen things. These occasions are so stunning: the moments when you realize your life is as it is supposed to be, only you've been comparing it to something that's beautifully packaged in this culture. The cover of the magazine. The advertisement. But trying to produce a biscuit—or a life—with no dirty bowls, no messy feelings, no depression and anger, was so frustrating."

Then savoring and actually tasting the present moment of experience—how much more complex and multifaceted, how unfathomable. You understand the story. Spiritual life trying to make Pillsbury biscuits? Good luck. You are unique.

A couple more stories and we'll end. Lots of stories tonight. I kind of think of things as saying, "Now what would be a good poem or story for that?" I haven't told this story in ages, and it's actually one that's meant a lot to me.

In Africa—and I talked about this with my friend Malidoma, who comes from the Dagara people of West Africa—in certain groups, certain people, he lives among the Dagara people but others as well, before a woman has a child she has to learn the song of that child. Part of her task before she becomes pregnant is to find some beautiful tree out somewhere in the land, go sit under that tree, get really quiet, and envision or sense the spirit of the child that wants to come and be born with her—that little boy or that little girl. Once she has a sense of that spirit wanting to be born, she has to ask it what its song is. And to learn the song of that child and sing it under that tree until she knows it by heart.

Then she goes back and teaches it to her lover. And when they make love, they sing the song together to invite that child to come in. She sings it to the baby as it grows in the womb. The midwives and women who gather when it's time for birth sing the song to the child when it first arrives—it's the first thing this child hears, the group of people around singing this baby's song.

Then it's taught to the village, and everybody knows each other's songs. So if the kid falls down and skins his knee or her knee, or cries or something, someone will pick them up and sing their song to them. It's sung in the rituals as they grow—you know, teenagers. The two songs of people are sung in a marriage ceremony so that they're brought together. And it's kept alive in the village until the very end, when somebody is old and ready to die. The last thing they do is gather around that person and sing that song to them.

When I heard this story, I thought, I want to live there. What would it be like to live in a culture where people know your song, know your uniqueness, know what's special about you—which there is in each one of us?

This is part of the one who knows: that which recognizes in the vastness there is also a uniqueness that is precious, and treasures it and values it and tends it in yourself, and tends and values and treasures that in others.

And then the last dimension—so many stories not told, but that's another night—is the one who knows understands how it works in this mystery: that you plant seeds and they bear fruit. That it's not random. What you practice becomes how things are.

The mind and the heart, the nervous system, the patterns of our relations, the patterns of society, the ecological patterns of the earth—these are ones that grow from repetition. It's part of how things work. If you want to learn meditation and really be able to live from the great heart of compassion and the one who knows, you have to practice. I mean, you practice guitar, right? Or you practice tennis or something. How about heart practice? You have to practice. Repetition is one of the keys. And depending what seeds you plant and what seeds you water, that's the pattern that will unfold.

Henry David Thoreau says, "I do not believe a plant will spring up where there has been no seed, but convince me you have a seed there and I am prepared to expect wonders."

The seeds can be seeds of kindness, of steadiness, of understanding, of self-respect, of courage, of standing up for what you care about, of speaking the truth, of seeing what's true, of loving another—which takes a lot of courage. There's a lot of things that ask for our courage, especially at this time.

It takes courage to plant the right seeds, and a consciousness. Yet something in the heart knows what seeds need to be planted and watered. We really do know this. And it's not a matter of time. You don't always get to see the results, but you get to focus on the best of your intention, on the value, the truth of what you speak, the rightness of what you do.

You set the heart's intention.

So the last story I'll tell, of so many, is of my friend Ari Ratana. Ari Ratana is now in his late eighties, and he's the most celebrated community organizer in Asia. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize at different times and won all these other prizes and so forth.

He was a high school teacher in a fancy prep school in the capital, Colombo, in Sri Lanka, as a young man—very much interested in social justice, very much interested in economic injustice, very much interested in the caste and racism that was happening there, trying to undo all the crazy things that human beings do with one another, seeing each other as if we're actually different.

So what he did was take his high school students, who were the sons of generals and ministers and wealthy business people, out to the poorest village areas. But he did something interesting. They were going to help in the school a little bit, yes—but he didn't bring them out there to help. He brought them out there so the villagers could teach them some things. They taught them how to use a machete, how to harvest certain kinds of fruits and crops. They taught them various arts they knew in the village, and then they served this magnificent banquet to these kids.

That was also a great kind of reversal, right? The upper-class kids—they weren't exactly white, but it was

like that—were coming from the upper class and going to help the poor people. And in fact, he flipped it. Because the measure of courage and understanding and wisdom and collective that's there out in the earth and in the people who live with difficulty is what we need in this culture.

We just did a retreat up in the Upper Retreat Center—Trudy, my beloved wife, and I—a four-day retreat, which happened to coincide with four days of no electricity. So here's one hundred people. We had a generator, so there was hot food in the dining room. But other than that, it was dark, and it was cold. It got down to forty-two degrees a couple of those nights. I was really cold—I could have done without that. But anyway, everybody was wrapped in blankets and had their little flashlight things. They were cool. They rose to it. They said, "All right, we're here." I said, "This is like the old days, remember? This is how it was done for thousands of years." And it was quite a fantastic retreat. Somehow, when the power came on the last night, there was a kind of "yes, we'll get warm," but there was also a disappointment—because we'd been through something.

So Ari took these young people out to learn in this way in the village. And he started something called Sarvodaya, which is the movement of the heart where people connect one heart to another to realize that we're all supporting one another on this beautiful earth. And it began to spread. As it did, they had different projects—digging wells, building schools, collaborating between villages and different parts of society.

And Ari explained: as it spread, it reached one half of the villages in the entire country over a period of twelve years. It just grew and grew and grew because it was based on love. And he said, "We're actually not building roads and digging wells and building schools. We're actually finding those to be vehicles so people can care for one another and so people can learn to love. That's really the goal."

Sri Lanka had a terrible civil war for quite a long time between different parts of the country. The Norwegians were trying to broker a peace treaty. And in the middle of that peace treaty making, Ari called all of his followers together to the great and ancient temple at Anuradhapura, the biggest old temple in Sri Lanka. And 650,000 people showed up. This in a country that only has eighteen million people.

And he stood up there and he said, "The Buddhist teachings say that one should not look at the results if one is wise, but one should look at the causes and conditions. And knowing the causes and conditions, one can then plant seeds to create other causes and conditions."

"So when I look," he said, "at our civil war, I see that it's taken five hundred years for us to get into this difficulty. Five hundred years of conflict between the Muslims and the Hindus and the Buddhists, four hundred years of colonial oppression, two hundred years of economic disparity between the wet, rich parts and the dry, poor parts."

"And so what I would like to offer you is the Sarvodaya Five Hundred Year Peace Plan. It took us five hundred years to get into this, and it will take us five hundred years to undo it."

Five years of ceasefire. Ten years of rebuilding roads and bridges and schools. Twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religious practices. Fifty to a hundred years of building an economic system that includes everyone. And after the first hundred years, we'll have a council to see how we're doing and what we need to focus on. And then we'll do it again four more times. And I believe at the end, Sri Lanka will be the nation that it could be.

When I heard this, I could have wept. I actually got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, who was kind of teared up about it as well. He knows Ari, but it speaks to his dilemma in Tibet. And the reason it was so moving was that it was the voice of an elder. It wasn't somebody who was worried about a focus group or the next election cycle or how long it would take. How long? As long as it takes.

Remember Dr. King again saying, "The moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice." That's the phrase.

So this is about planting seeds, and it's actually revolutionary. It's a rebellion and it's a revolution because you don't turn back. You say, this is the heart's intention. This is what I know to be true in this life. This is what's possible. And I will be one of the ones that plants the seeds and waters and nurtures them—in myself, in the community around me, in the things that I care about.

So you meditate to quiet your mind, to tend your body and heart, to be able to hold it all—this remarkable, mysterious, painful, pleasurable human life—with great compassion and presence. And to find a kind of freedom of spirit, where who you are is not limited by praise and blame and gain and loss. You become the loving witness of it all. You become the one who knows, that awareness that is both timeless and also engaged from the heart of wisdom.

And the Buddha says, if it were not possible to liberate the heart, to be free in all the circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible for you to live with a free and liberated heart, so I offer these teachings.

So let's sit for a moment.

And as you go through your days, remember to pause. Take moments to become the witness, to rest in loving awareness, to be the one who knows—that vast and spacious openness. That's who you really are. As you go through your days, take a pause, and opening to vastness, then listen to your heart. It knows what matters.

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