Loving the World | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 45:03

So this evening we'll have some teachings, as is often the case. Occasionally there's dialogue or Q&A, and then there's a slideshow—short, not so many minutes. Then we'll do a bit of a ritual as we come closer to the winter solstice, because it is a time that people all around the world, at least in the Northern hemisphere, quiet themselves as we get closer to the darkest day of the year.

There are all the different kinds of holiday celebrations that go back to ancient times, fostered in all the different cultural and spiritual and religious traditions. Most of them have to do with light—lighting candles and fires, in some way trying to bring light. It's sort of superstitious and inaccurate to think that it's light to bring the light back. What it really is, is an acknowledgement that we carry an inner light as well as the outer light, and that we can trust that light in ourselves and others, and that the light will return.

This becomes really important in these times, because they're tough times outwardly. We all have our personal dilemmas, but it's also visible—the growing divisiveness in the world, the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, the growing fear-based tribalism, nationalism, racism, climate change, the lack of protection for women in many ways in the world, the cultural anxiety that we all live in. This is part of what we carry in our hearts.

One of the things that's grown out of Spirit Rock is all kinds of interesting projects and beautiful things that people are doing—people who get quiet here and quiet their minds and tend their hearts and then go out and express that stillness through caring for the world. We've got the Insight Prison Project and the Insight Out Prison Project, different prison projects that I've been involved with over time, along with others from Spirit Rock.

Dear friends who work in the prisons share stories like this: more than two-thirds of incarcerated women are in prison for non-violent, low-level drug crimes or property crimes. One person doing prison work said that one of the incarcerated women she was working with was a young Black mother serving a long prison sentence for writing checks to buy her three young children Christmas gifts without sufficient funds in her account. She seemed like a character out of a Victor Hugo novel. She cheerfully explained the tale, and this person couldn't really accept the truth of it until she checked the file and discovered that she had in fact been convicted and sentenced to over ten years in prison for writing five checks, including three to Toys R Us. None of them was for more than $150.

We carry this. We know about the horrors of the prison system in our country, the largest in the world. We know about these things, and they're not just tough for us to know about—we carry them together

with our own personal struggles. This is our human life. We read about or hear about the news of people on the border, refugee camps on our own border. We don't have to talk about the Rohingya or the refugees pouring out of Syria or the Uyghurs. It's here in the U.S., and homelessness too.

I'm naming all these things because they're part of the tough times that we have, and they touch our hearts. It's not like we know this and completely turn away. There's something in us that cares, and it makes it harder to hold it.

So how do we get through this? How do we get through times where the light seems to disappear, as it does in the turning of the seasons and the earth around the sun toward our winter solstice—but also through outwardly tough times, times of darkness?

The Buddhist texts begin with a phrase: "Oh nobly born, oh you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are." This is an invitation to remember your own Buddha nature or true nature, your original goodness.

Scientists who study butterflies and caterpillars know that a caterpillar will go into a cocoon, undergo some change, and come out with wings to fly away—which is already kind of astonishing. But what most people don't realize is that they don't go in there as a caterpillar and then sprout and grow wings. They actually dissolve themselves, so that if you were to open the cocoon at a certain stage, it's a mass of liquid cells and there's no caterpillar anymore. There's just all the cells that made up that animal.

And then there's a specific type of cell in that chrysalis that scientists have named imaginal cells. I just love it—because imaginal cells are the ones that think they can fly. They're the first cells that organize all those other cells into a new and different organism, so that when it's time, it will come out of that chrysalis as a moth or a butterfly and fly away.

In a way, this is what our Buddha nature or true nature is about. We have in our own hearts that kind of imaginal cells. We each have a capacity for awakening, for dignity, for freedom, for greater compassion—to gaze upon this troubled and unbearably beautiful world with the great heart of compassion, with the eyes of compassion and wonder and the eyes of wisdom, to see it from the heart of understanding.

Because here you are, born into this human realm, into a human incarnation. It's kind of wild. Nobody gave you the manual when you came in, right?

And it's like, well, how do I do this as a human being? How do I live beautifully as a human being in this mystery?

I just came back from traveling, and was helping with my beloved Trudy. She and I were together in Hawaii helping teach a retreat with Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*. Ram Dass is now eighty-eight years old, and he's kind of frail. He's been in a wheelchair for twenty years, and he can't speak very many words

this year—he's sort of losing his verbal capacity. But he was there. And Krishna Das would sing beautiful kirtan in the evening, and we would teach and do meditation, Trudy and I and others.

And then we'd also hear from people in the group. There was everything—people's gratitude and triumph: "We've done this, I've practiced, I've found my way." There was somebody who came up and talked to me about having two-year-old triplets. I said, "My God, how did you get away to even come to this retreat?" All the beautiful things. And then people also stood up and talked about loss—about a child who died, or someone in the middle of struggling with cancer. And in many cases, they talked about how nourishing it was to be on this retreat and come together to chant and sing and meditate and be in the field of love and practice.

At the end of the retreat—which I've been teaching now for a number of years with Ram Dass, Trudy and I have—he does a blessing ceremony in which everyone is given a little wrist mala, a little set of beads, and tied into it is one thread from his guru's blanket, from Neem Karoli Baba.

Now, when I was joking around at the beginning about gurus and lamas and swamis and mamas, I didn't mean to say that there aren't many wonderful gurus, because there are. You have to use your discriminating wisdom to sort them, because they're like anything—there's all kinds of gurus. But Ram Dass's guru was a really remarkable, amazing figure.

My favorite story, which he tells most every year but this year couldn't speak as much, is that he had been training and doing his yoga and meditation and learning all the inner practices and devotional practices with his guru. And he was happy just to be living in India. But then his guru said, "No, you have to go back to America and teach." And he didn't want to do that. He wanted to stay in this wonderful place where he was filled with love. His guru said, "No, you have to go back." And Ram Dass said, "You know, I feel unready. I feel I'm not cooked. I feel insecure. I feel impure in some ways. I want to become more pure."

And his guru got up off the little seat where he was resting and stood up. He looked really closely at Ram Dass from top to bottom, then walked around and looked at his side, then looked at him from the back. He spent a few minutes gazing at him, looking at every part of him. Then he sat back down and quieted himself and looked Ram Dass in the eye and said, "I see no imperfections."

Ram Dass said that was a moment that really changed his life. It's sometimes called the gaze of wonder, or the gaze of love, that can change everything.

So here's Ram Dass at the end of the retreat, and he couldn't speak much. He was sitting there, and others close to him blessed these malas. Then in front of him, someone would put one in each person's hand while we were all chanting. It took a while—an hour, an hour and a half with some hundreds of people. And he would just look at people with so much love. I had a front row seat there.

I remembered reading about Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic. There is in Louisville, Kentucky, at the intersection of Fourth Street and Walnut, probably the only historical monument and plaque to a

mystical experience that I know of in the United States. Merton wrote about it. He said, "I came out of the monastery where we were trying to do holy practices, to go shopping or whatever, and I was walking down Fourth Street. And all of a sudden I could see this secret beauty in the eyes of everyone that I passed." He said, "If we could see each other this way, there'd be no more war or hatred or greed. The big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other." He said, "There I was trying to be holy in the monastery, and the divine—whatever you want to call it—was shining out of the eyes of absolutely everybody I passed."

I love that story. I've told it many times. Sitting there with Ram Dass and watching these people file by—everybody, the woman with the triplets and the person with cancer—all gazing into his eyes, so many people with tears. There was such beauty in it, because he just radiates love. That's all. He said, "I just love everything. I love everybody. I love everything without exception."

And you could feel it.

And it's been with me a lot as I drive or walk around, because I notice that I see people and I can say, all right, this person is a friend, I like them. Or this person I don't know very well—somebody new. But then I can change the lens, and I wonder who they really are, how their life is. What if they were more than a friend? What if this was my sister or my brother? How would I feel? What if they were my lover or my partner? What if they were my daughter or my son?

And all of a sudden, as I look and see that person and what they carry—because we all carry our measure of tears and our struggles—but we also carry such beauty behind it. The fact that we're still here and surviving. You can start to see, you can play with awareness itself. With the lens of the heart, you can start to see the beauty in everybody. It's just a different way of walking down the street, or working with people.

And so I was moved and inspired. I wept a little bit and was touched, and mostly just reminded that this is what matters. We don't do it all the time—I don't do it all the time either. I do my practices and try to remember.

The Sufis put it this way. They say, "Overcome any bitterness because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you." Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, we are each endowed with a certain measure of that cosmic pain. You are called upon to meet it in compassion instead of self-pity. You're part of the mother of the world.

And so you see each person, and they all have their troubles and they all have their beauty. When the heart is open, you can say, "Oh yes, this is my daughter, this is my son, this is the closest being in the world to me." And it changes things. But we're afraid somehow inside ourselves that our heart isn't big enough, that we'd get overwhelmed, that it's too much.

Two days ago I was in Los Angeles, and Insight LA—which is the Los Angeles sister center to Spirit Rock,

run by my wife Trudy, my beloved—a series of different centers in LA, we had our annual benefit. There were a number of wonderful speakers who came, people who do incredible work in the world. And the pièce de résistance of the benefit was Father Greg Boyle, who started Homeboy Industries. He's a Catholic priest.

For any of you who don't know his book called *Tattoos on the Heart*, which is in the bookstore—it's one of the most moving books that I've read in years and years. He's a really remarkable person. He was talking about his ministry, because what Homeboy Industries has done now for twenty years or more is take gang kids in and care for them. They teach them how to get a job, how to live in the world, how to support themselves. They have all kinds of industries, contracts with the city. They have cafés—Homegirl Café. There's one in the airport, actually.

But he gets these guys and gals who have been on the streets, who have been part of gangs. And partly they're part of gangs because they need a family. They need an initiation. There's nobody to care for them or initiate them. If you were among the Maasai people and you were a young man, they'd say, "Go and hunt a lion and come back, and now we'll see you as a worthy man in our community." There are the same kinds of initiations for young women. But we don't have that for our young people. So they're trying to prove themselves. And they do it in a kind of undeclared war on the streets—lots of violence, lots of shooting, lots of rivalry.

And in the middle of it is Father Greg. He knows them all. He's baptized a lot of them. He does rituals for them, for many of them. And as he said sadly, he also buries some of them.

He said, "My work is to take the people who've been disposed of by this culture, who've been denigrated and dispossessed and thrown out—not only on the streets, but really thrown out of people's hearts. And I bring them in and I see their beauty and I make a real relationship with them." They love him, and he's funny and he's wise.

He was telling stories—he's full of amazing stories. He said, "So I had these two homies come in to work. After a while, to get them ready, I put them to work in our bakery." These guys were from rival gangs that had been shooting at each other.

And that was the kind of stories that he told. And you could feel his humility and his calling and his care and his bravery. To see those who we cast out in some way in our culture and our time, and see them with the eyes that Thomas Merton described, or Ram Dass—the secret beauty.

So I've been reading or telling stories this year, longer stories in the classes that I've done. And there's a story I want to read tonight. I have to apologize because it's a story I've used a couple of times in the last twenty years, so some of you will have heard it. But you have to just think about it.

It's like when I hang out with my grandson Desmond, who just turned one year old and is—just this last week—able to walk himself. He's sort of like drunk, you know, like one of those little drunk people, but he

can do it. And half the time his hands are up like he's triumphant: "I've done it! I can move myself!" But he has a lot of books, and he likes to have his books read. And it's not like he hears the book and then wants a new one. He wants to hear the story again. "Would you read that one again?" So keep that little beginner's mind here.

It was Sunday, Christmas. Our family spent the holidays in the Bay Area, but in order to be back for work Monday, we had to drive the four hundred miles back to L.A. on Christmas Day. Normally an eight-hour drive, but with kids it can be a fourteen-hour endurance test. When we could stand it no longer, we stopped for lunch in King City—a little metropolis of six gas stations and three diners.

Road weary, saddle sore, I sat Eric, our one-and-a-half-year-old, in a high chair and looked around and thought, "What am I doing in this place on Christmas Day?" It was nearly empty. We were the only family.

My reverie was interrupted when I heard Eric squeal with delight and glee. "Hi there!"—two words he thought were one word. "Hi there! Hi there!" He pounded his fat baby hands, whack-whack, on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and chirped.

And then I saw the source of his merriment, and my eyes couldn't take it in all at once. A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else long ago. Dirty, greasy, worn. Baggy pants, zipper half-mast over a spindly body. Toes that poked out of old shoes. A face like none other—gums as bare as Eric's, whiskers too short to be called a beard, and a nose so varicose it looked like the map of New York. I was too far away to smell him, but I knew he smelled. And his hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists. "Hi there, baby! Hi there, big boy! I see you, buster!"

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between "What do we do?" and "Poor devil."

Eric continued to laugh and answer, "Hi there! Hi there!" Every call was echoed. I noticed waitresses' eyebrows shoot to their foreheads, and several people were groaning out loud. This old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby.

I shoved a cracker at Eric, and he pulverized it on the tray. I began to get upset. Our meal came. The cacophony continued. Now the old bum was shouting from across the room, "Do you know pat-a-cake?"

Do you know peek-a-boo? Peek-a-boo! Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo! Really loud. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was drunk and a disturbance, and I was embarrassed. My husband was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, "Why is that old man shouting and talking so loud?"

We ate in silence—all except Eric, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring applause of a skid row bum.

Finally, I had enough. I turned the high chair. Eric screamed and clambered around to face his buddy. Now I was mad. Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Eric and meet him in the parking lot.

I trundled Eric out of the high chair and looked toward the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door. *Lord, let me out of here*, I thought, *before he speaks to us*.

It soon became obvious that the Lord and Eric had other plans.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him. And as I did so, Eric—all the while with his eyes riveted to his new best friend—leaned far over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's pick-me-up position. In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye to eye with the old man. Eric was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes both asked and implored: *Would you let me hold your baby?*

There was no need or way for me to answer, since Eric propelled himself from my arms into the man's. Suddenly, a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Eric laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed. I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. Aged hands, full of grime and pain and labor, so gently cradled my baby's bottom and back.

I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Eric in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened. He said in a commanding voice, looking directly at me, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow I managed, "I will, I will," from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Eric from his chest—unwillingly, longingly—as though he was in pain. "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift."

I said nothing more than a muttered thanks. With Eric back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Eric so tightly, and why I was saying, "How could I have forgotten? How could I have forgotten?"

This is really Father Greg's work—to see each person that comes through the door in that way, to see the humanity of every person. And now, in the time of solstice, the fertile darkness, we're called upon to see with different eyes. Maybe to see with the heart, if you will.

Helen Keller said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." In these times, we can feel like despairing, worried that it won't work out. The poet Deena Metzger writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised, and I will make a light of it to make you weep, and we will have rain, and we will begin again." This is what we do as human beings—we start again.

Or Gandhi, who says, "When I despair"—and that's an amazing line to hear from Mahatma Gandhi. When *I* despair. So it's not just you, right? "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. Yes, there have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always."

So it's collective. But it's also very personal for each one of us. For me, being with Ram Dass and being with Father Greg—these saintly people—I think, "Well, am I supposed to be like them?" Still my ego at work. *Ok ay, I could be like them.* No way.

I can't be them. I can only be me.

I remember seeing the documentary *Saint Misbehaving*, a beautiful film made about Wavy Gravy. At one point, the film shows Wavy Gravy—who has done all this extraordinary service work, working with kids in hospitals and burn units through his clown ministry, or working in India for the Seva Foundation, which has now completed its five millionth eye surgery to restore sight to five million blind people. Incredible work. And there's Wavy Gravy, who is this sort of wondrous and ridiculous character—really, he is—and I love him. He's got his altar, and the film shows him making his morning prayer. His prayer is something like: "Dear God, please make me the best Wavy Gravy you can." It's sincere. And it's also wacky. But it's just right.

I can sense in myself that I'm not going to be those sages and saintly people. But I can be more present. I can be more attentive. I can be more loving. I can remember more often. I can see with the eyes of love. And we all have this possibility.

We're all both very fortunate and unfortunate. That's how it is, being a human being. But in the middle of that, we each have the possibility for greater compassion, greater love, greater presence, greater wakefulness, greater freedom in ourselves.

Hafez, the poet, says: "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions."

What this means is to be unafraid to be happy. How's that? Because Father Greg is happy, Ram Dass is happy, the Dalai Lama is happy. Now I just named a bunch of guys. I could name some very wonderful women who are also happy—saints and sages of all kinds. I think of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, who received the Nobel Prize. They said, "Liberia used to be known for its child soldiers, and now it's known for its women leaders." The suffering isn't the end of the story; it's actually possible to turn it around.

To be unafraid to be happy. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote: "Now and then it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy." This is it. This is your life. It's actually possible to be unafraid to be happy, to be unafraid to love.

If fear is the cheapest room in the house—I remember this Feiffer cartoon. There's a woman on her knees with her arms outstretched, saying, "I love you." And there's a guy standing there with his arms crossed, and the little bubble of response is: "Don't you threaten me." Oh, Feiffer is so good.

To be unafraid to be happy. To be unafraid to love. And to be unafraid to make a difference. Because you are making a difference by the way you live, by what you say, by how you see the world, by how you drive and shop and vote—all the things that make you a citizen, how you move through this world.

To be unafraid to make a difference, to plant your seeds, which are beautiful when you own them. Your own Buddha nature. There is more love, more compassion, more capacity to care for yourself as well as others, because that's the circle of compassion. Is this compassionate for them, and is it compassionate for this one here? They have to come together.

And then you join in. You join in—whether it's working for climate transformation, getting out the vote, the community garden, writing poems that transform people's consciousness, teaching refugees to read, working in the schools, or building a conscious business. Join in something that matters, where when you go to sleep, you feel like, "All right, I'm also doing something very deliberate, joining the others who make a difference." Because this really has to be done partly by you, but it also has to be done in community.

Some years ago, on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Seattle, a young Catholic priest stopped to talk to a parishioner and her five-year-old daughter, Carmen. The little girl had a new jump rope, and the priest, being young, began to demonstrate the intricacies of rope jumping from his own childhood. Delighted, little Carmen began to jump—first once, then twice. The mother and priest clapped loudly for her skill. Eventually, the little girl was able to jump quite well on her own and wandered off with her newfound ability. Priest and mother chatted a few moments until Carmen, with sadder, wiser eyes, returned, dragging her rope.

"Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."

So you have these things to plant, to change, whether it's the vote or the climate or the refugees or whatever it happens to be. But we also need each other in it.

E.B. White said, "I wake up in the morning not knowing whether to save the world or savor it." This dilemma. Of course, the answer to all these kind of Zen koans is yes. The answer is yes—to save and to savor. And so you join others in this.

Mr. Rogers' mother was the one who told him that when things are really difficult and there's some catastrophe or natural disaster or a big problem, don't focus on the problem, on the fire, on the hurricane. Look for the helpers. Look for the thousand people from Alabama and Georgia and various places who came with their boats. The armada—I think it was called the Cajun Navy—from Louisiana that went to Houston to take dogs off roofs and pick up mothers and their children. So you align yourself with those who care.

And you plant your seeds, and it doesn't matter how long it takes. Poet Wendell Berry says, "Plant sequoias." They take two thousand years. That way you get out of the head of thinking you're going to see the result. And you have the joy of planting the seeds for the long term. It's so mysterious.

Don't be afraid to start anew. This is the perfect time. Not just New Year's resolutions, by the way. I got a request—I forget which magazine it was, it might have been Cosmo, one of those checkout stand women's magazines that we know—and they asked me to do an article for New Year's on lasting change. How the New Year's resolutions go out the door after about a week or two. And I said, "Lasting change? You're asking a Buddhist to do lasting change? I think you've got the wrong person here." Things change, you know.

But the beautiful thing about things change is you can start anew. With this solstice and with the darkness—it's called fertile darkness—the things that really matter in your heart can come more into the light. So start anew. Let yourself forgive the past, however it was.

There's this line of poetry from a Zen poet: "My old faults like snow falling on warm ground." Isn't that tender? My old faults like snow falling on warm ground.

There's a way in which we can look at our past judgmentally. We all have done all kinds of things—good and not so good, and then worse than that. But here's William Butler Yeats: "I'm content to follow to its source every event in action and thought his whole life. Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot. When such as I cast out remorse, so great a sweetness flows into my breast, for we must laugh and we must sing, for we are blessed by everything and everything we look upon is blessed."

So you forgive the past—it's done, it's gone. You start anew and you open yourself to mystery. Because it really is mysterious. Nobody knows how we got here. Really. Not to speak of where we're going. Nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow. Somebody tell me for sure—raise your hand, I'll invest. But we don't know. Is it going to go up or down?

What is going to happen? It's so mysterious.

So instead, the invitation into this mystery is to keep your heart open and tend it beautifully.

This from Rachel Carson, the great naturalist. She says, "If I had influence with the good fairy who's supposed to preside over the birth of all children, I would ask that her gift to each child in the world would be a sense of wonder so indestructible it would last throughout life."

Or as Mary Oliver put it in her famous line, "I was a bride married to amazement."

And the fact that we're here, that we speak and listen and communicate and come together and come apart and that we're part of this turning world circling our star—what a wonder.

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