Courage in Our Difficult Times | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 45:37

Hi again and welcome back.

Now I'd like to offer a story, a long big story, and some reflections and teachings. I see them more than anything as a reminder that we need in this wild and unbidden and really uncertain territory.

Meditation, as we just did, can of course help us relieve stress and find a grounding and a centeredness. But the point of meditation isn't to get somewhere else, but to actually become—to remember—who we really are, to come alive in the present moment as loving awareness itself. To remember.

In Bali, they say when a little child is born, they don't even let the babies touch the earth for six months. They carry them. They say those who are closest to the gods are tiny infants who just come from the other world, or old people who are getting ready to return to it. And the people furthest from the gods are middle-aged people with mortgages who forget who they really are.

So our task, especially in this difficult time, is to stop, is to go deep. As the I Ching says, my friend Peter Levine threw the I Ching and came up with the well. It says to go deep in this time, down deep, where there's neither increase nor decrease, but something timeless. Otherwise, we can get caught up in all of the anxiety and fear, because part of what's gone viral is fear, not the virus itself.

The word pandemic comes from the Greek *pan*. It's also the root of panic and pandemonium. It's the wildness of the god Pan, dancing. This is one of the energies of life, but it's not the only energy.

Of course, there's the great cultural anxiety and global fears. But also, there's our response. I watched some of the concert and celebration of working people and healing people—the healers—the eight-hour concert that Lady Gaga stewarded with all the amazing and wonderful singers. Part of what was most moving about it was the clips of doctors and nurses and frontline people and bus drivers and people who were in the warehouses, all of them saying, "We're with you, we're part of you." There was a sense of solidarity.

I also love that there's so much humor coming out. Even in the face of all this, Dolly Parton wrote a song. Here are the lyrics:

This too shall pass as all things will, if the virus don't kill us the stay-at-home will. The kids are bored and restless, they scream and yell and squawk, and the teens and tweens they're just plain mean, they bite your

bleeping head off. And all those loving couples that were once so sweet and cozy, now they fight like cats and dogs like Donald and Pelosi. Lord, get us back to school and get us back to work and get out of this goddang house before somebody gets hurt. And Lord, please find a vaccination in the form of a shot or a pill, because if the virus don't kill us, the stay-at-home will.

So here we are, all cooped up with our loved ones. As Jimmy Fallon had somebody tweet into The Tonight Show, she was already considering expelling her children from homeschool.

We have to deal with this and with one another. How do we do it? And what really matters?

A poem by Thomas Santolalla:

In the evening, we shall be examined on love. And it won't be multiple choice. In the evening when the sky has turned that certain blue, the blue of exam books, we shall climb the hill as the light empties and park our tired bodies on a bench above the city and try to fill in the blanks. We shall be examined on love like students who don't even recall signing up for the course and now must take their orals, forced to speak for once from the heart.

For us to speak for once from the heart. This is really the curriculum of this life and this incarnation in the midst of it all.

I want to talk about how we hold this and how we navigate this with the practice that we just did together and with a deeper understanding. We're part of the great mystery. The Buddhist texts begin, "O nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature, your Buddha nature."

There's that wonderful poem from Juan Ramón Jiménez, where he says, *Yo no soy yo*—I am not I. I'm this one walking beside me whom I do not see, whom at times I manage to visit, and at other times I forget. The one who remains silent when I talk. The one who forgives sweet when I hate. The one who takes a walk when I am indoors, the one who will remain standing when I die.

In the meditation, we shifted from the experience of body, heart, and mind to become the loving witness itself of our restlessness, our doubting and fearful mind, our tears, our longing, our love—to bow to all of these things.

But of course, that's a very nice idea. How do we actually embody it?

I know being here with my beloved Trudy, we're mostly doing good, but once in a while we get on each other's nerves like human beings do. And I have a practice. I actually told her about it. It's sort of a secret practice I have. I think about the passage from Thomas Merton where he talked about seeing the secret beauty behind the eyes of every being.

And my secret practice, when I find frustration or annoyance arising, is to look at her—to look at her

eyes—and see the girl, the innocent child, the young girl, the young teenager who's still in there with so much possibility and beauty and love. And when I see that secret beauty, the rest falls away. Even though I cleaned the stove. We are taking turns cleaning the house, and she came and said, "Jack, you know, you can't just wipe the grease away." And I had to learn a whole new deep dharma of what it means to properly clean the stove. Thank you, my beloved.

So we become loving awareness. We become the witness to the joys and sorrows, to the praise and blame, to the things that are joyful and wonderful in our life and the things that are difficult. And in this, we open to a deeper mystery. We open to a mystery of becoming that one who, as Machado says, sees ourself walking or talking—but we know we're greater than this. We're not just caught in our personality and in our small self. We are actually timeless awareness itself, the Buddha nature itself, witnessing it all.

The story I want to tell is a famous story of initiation. And initiation means going through a difficulty in order to find that which is unshakable. Sometimes it's deliberate—the Maasai will send a young man out into the desert with a spear, and the initiation is to confront and kill a lion and bring it back to prove that he is a man. Or a young woman in the Maasai people learns what it means to give birth and become a creator of the world through her body. But an initiation requires us to face a difficulty, to go through such a narrow place that it divests us of all our baggage, all the things we held as being true or dear, to find something deeper.

The great Zen teacher Karlfried Graf Dürckheim writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to those friends who offer comfort and encourage their old self to survive. Rather, they will seek out someone who will faithfully and inexorably help them to risk themselves, so that they may endure the difficulty and pass courageously through it. Only to the extent that a person exposes themselves over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found within them. In this daring lies dignity and the spirit of true awakening."

Sometimes initiation is deliberate, but most often it comes—as the Greeks say—as a *katabasis*, a blow: an accident, an illness, a divorce, a loss of business, something that happens in your family. But now we have the blow to our worldwide and global culture. It is a cultural initiation that has released some of the Furies on the earth. And if you look into the Greek myths, none of the gods can stop the Furies. Vengeance and the power of the Furies, paranoia—these arise when truth is not being honored. In the end, the only thing that could stop them was the great goddess of wisdom, Athena, who took them into her temple and made an altar and said, "We respect the truths that need to be spoken, and thus we respect you."

So here we are, needing to embrace all of the difficulty and go through it as an initiation, saying, "Yes, we will bring all this into the temple of our awareness."

The ancient story, the myth of Nachiketa, comes from the Katha Upanishads. Nachiketa was a young man born centuries ago into a wealthy family in the top one percent of the culture, living a life of privilege. When his father became old and was frightened of illness and epidemics, frightened of aging and death,

he went to the priests at one of the temples. The religious leaders told him, "If you want to be certain to have a beautiful death, or a beautiful birth after death, you must make a great offering to the temple." You know how that happens in some forms of religion.

And so the father decided to trust them. He made a huge public ceremony, a parade in which he brought all his cattle and gold and wealth, declaring, "I give all that I value to the temple." This was his way of trying to buy security with everything he had gained in his life.

But his son Nachiketa could see the hypocrisy of it, the sham of it. You can't buy security with money. It doesn't matter how much money you have—you're still human, and you still have to go through what we all go through as human beings.

"I give all I value to the priests and temple," the father proclaimed. His son was so upset that he said aloud, in front of everyone, "All you value? What about your son?"—as if to shame his father for his hypocrisy.

Being publicly rebuked in this way, the father turned to him and said, "I give you—I give you to death." For he was mortified by what his son had said in front of everyone.

Nachiketa, as young men do, turned toward him and said, "I accept."

Now it was time for young Nachiketa to enter what the poet Dante called the dark wood that one finds at a certain point in life—the unknown. So Nachiketa said, "All right, my father gives me to death. I will go and seek out death and find what I can learn." He went deep into the forest and sat without moving for three days and three nights, through pain and hunger and fear, waiting to see if death would appear. This is like the poet Kabir, who said, "I decided to go on a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days."

Somehow Nachiketa knew that something had to die. He had to confront something deeper than his father's money or the acclaim of the community. I see this often when people talk to me about depression, or even suicide.

And someone will say, I feel suicidal, or this person I know is asking me about suicide. And of course, our first response is to say, don't do it—it's wrong. Treasure life. But there's another deep response as well, which is to understand that something does have to die. It's not the body. The solution is not the body. But that feeling that they have to die is really pointing toward a false identity: the job that they can't do anymore, the relationship that's killing them, the speed, the grasping—all the things we've seen in the toxic qualities of our culture that have slowed down now.

Somehow there's something in that person that says, I know something has to die, and they get confused and think the body is what must go. But it's something deeper that's being called. And in us, there's an intuitive wisdom that knows we can descend into this. For as Bob Dylan says, "She who's not busy dying is not busy being born." Something like that. Anyway, Bob Dylan named it.

So Nachiketa went to the kingdom of death. And after three days of not moving—the fire in his body, the

pain, the fear, the dark of the forest, everything that we confront in meditation times a hundred—after not moving through three days and nights, he found himself at the kingdom of death. But Lord Yama, the king of death, wasn't there. Only his assistants—war, pestilence, and famine—were there. He asked for the king of death and they said, I'm sorry, he's out collecting rent. You will have to wait.

And so Nachiketa waited longer. And finally, when death returned, his assistants said, you know, there's a very unusual young man who's come here to see you. And the Lord of Death sat opposite Nachiketa and said, you are indeed unusual, for you sat for three days and nights waiting to come see me, and then I wasn't here, and you sat for three more days and nights. And because you've come in this remarkable way, a courageous young man, and because I have not received you directly in a worthy way, I will offer you three boons, three wishes.

Now of course, we're in the mythological territory of a fairy tale. What are the three wishes that the king of death has offered to Nachiketa? And they're part of this story that has been told for thousands of years.

So Nachiketa sat and he asked for his first of three boons. The first was: I ask for the blessing of forgiveness. And this is why we teach metta now at the beginning of our retreats, and we weave it into our meditation, into mindfulness—why we call it mindful loving awareness.

Nachiketa said, I ask that my father forgive me and that I forgive him, that my father could see me with the eyes he saw me when I was his firstborn son. And the reason that this was the first boon that he asked is because we can't go any further in the liberation of the heart and the freedom that we seek without starting with the balm of compassion and forgiveness and love. For we've all been disappointed. We've all been betrayed. We've all been hurt in so many ways, ourselves and others. And in the end, if we are to live a free life—what Nachiketa was seeking, a new life, a death and rebirth—it starts with a forgiving heart, to not put another being out of our heart.

There is an extraordinary book by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was one of the great South African psychologists and healers who helped with the truth and reconciliation process. And she decided in her work to try to understand what she called the evil that had come upon people. And she spent a year going into the prison to talk to the architect of apartheid who had ordered the deaths and killings of so many: Eugene de Kock. And she sat opposite him week after week after week, talking to him and listening to him. This is recorded in her book.

And one night, after listening and talking on and on, he said, I think that I lost it all. It's the feeling of loss. The first thing that goes is innocence. There's no more fairy tales or Bambi. That's gone. We killed a lot of people and they killed some of ours.

We fought for nothing. We fought each other, basically, eventually, for nothing. We could all have been alive having a beer. So I'm confused. I'm so very tired.

And he hung his head down and shifted his legs to adjust to the chains that bound him to the chair, his

eyes downcast, like someone reflecting on the greatest tragedy and loss in his life.

And the fact that she could go and sit with him and listen with an open heart, with curiosity—not even compassion, but an interest in understanding, a presence—was the very energy that the truth and reconciliation process grew out of.

We all have forgiveness to do. And in this difficult time, we're asked to do some reflections in the heart. What do you have to forgive, small and large, for your heart to be free? Some of it is self-forgiveness. Some of it is forgiveness of others. Asking forgiveness. But holding yourself with tenderness. My old faults, like snow falling on warm ground. When we hold ourselves with self-compassion, even the difficulties are held in a new way.

I remember sitting with Ram Dass, and he told the story of being with his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. Neem Karoli Baba looked at Ram Dass with so much love and gave him very simple instructions. He said, "Ram Dass, love everybody." And then he paused and he said, "Ram Dass, tell the truth."

Now these sound like beautiful spiritual instructions, right? But as Ram Dass said, "I was surrounded by this whole coterie of Westerners who'd come because I was with the guru. And I was irritated by them. They were taking up time. And the more I looked, they were there on their own ego trips and they were puffing themselves up and they were grasping and grabbing and they were neurotic and their personalities were quite unappealing in many cases. And I looked at them and I said, 'Ah, but my guru said tell the truth.' The truth was I hated them. I didn't like them. I wanted them out of there. And then he said, 'Ram Dass, love everybody.'"

That was his koan, and he sat with it and he worked with it. And he said one day he was sitting there looking in the eyes of his guru with that glance of mercy—which is the name for when someone sees you so deeply, so lovingly, that it changes the cells of your body and you remember that you are love. And he looked and he said, "All these crazy Westerners like me who came—I love them all. I love every single one of them." And it was a breakthrough and a transformation.

And it asks us: What do we have to forgive for our hearts to be free?

This was Nachiketa's first boon. And it's yours as we go through this descent, because it is difficult. It's difficult for all of us collectively and in our families, in our communities, and as a society. And this forgiveness doesn't mean that we accept things that are being done that cause suffering, that we don't try to change them, to stand up for what matters, to stand up for care and justice for everyone. What it means is that in the end, we don't put anyone out of our heart. That we can wish everyone: May you be free from hatred. May you be free from fear. May you be free from ignorance.

So Nachiketa received his first boon and his heart became softened, and he was able to now live through the next part of his deep initiation—as you must do. To reclaim your heart in the middle of all that's so difficult.

What would his second boon be? He turned back to Lord Yama and said, "The second boon I ask for..."

His inner fire is courage. Remember, he's a young man—you know, the kind that says, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?" I remember that. I remember going in the forest monastery and saying, "What are the wildest austerities you guys do? Show me, let me try them out." That's kind of what we want to do. You want to prove yourself, but more than that, you want to find something deep in yourself. As Dürckheim said, something that's unshakable.

And he wanted to come fully alive. So he asked for

this unshakable spirit.

And here's a poem from Anton Taylor—again, voices from South Africa:

The sun rose each day and we the South Africans waited. From across the world the stories came, carried by terror. From across the world the virus came. The sun rose each day and so did the numbers. The streets quieted, the soldiers came—not always in that order. Unable to see or hear or hold each other, we had to unlearn how we showed love. We wondered what will it feel like, but no one could tell us. We did not know that we were grieving, only that we were grieving for something unknowable yet certain. So we the South Africans waited.

The sun rises each day, and so do the numbers. Because I cannot hold you, I must cling to these precious things—truths I do know, immutable facts which are immune to a virus. I do know we are South Africans. We have endured what most others have not. We, the South Africans, have survived many times that which is unfathomable.

If pain builds resilience, and if one can suffer without succumbing to cruelty, then perhaps, although many of us are sick and poor and unable to self-isolate, we are prepared in a way that is not as apparent, in a manner not born of wealth or infrastructure. You see, in a part of us so deep that it is fathomless, there is a key—to choose I or us, to rise together. And those of us who've already lived apart but together through so much, we've been asked to decide.

There's so much I do not know, but I do know we are South Africans. I do know our decision was made long before this pandemic, many times over. We have chosen us. I do know one day the sun will rise and the numbers will not.

This is what Nachiketa asked for. He asked for that strength of heart to go through everything that was difficult. And it's never too late to start. This is the time. As one of our great founders said, one person with courage is a majority. Standing up for justice, caring for others in the middle of this time, speaking the truth with love. As Nelson Mandela said, "Do not judge me by my successes. Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." This is your humanity. This is what's possible for you.

And so the second boon was granted to Nachiketa.

Now comes the last boon—the last gift, the last blessing. Nachiketa sat quietly. He looked at Lord Yama and said, "What I ask now is a great boon. I wish to know that which is immortal." Kind of audacious, this young man, making that his final wish.

Lord Yama looked back at him and said, "Really? You could have anything." And he showed him visions of royal chariots with great steeds—basically the Ferraris of the day—and bevies of beautiful women and consorts, and the best of banquets. "You could have anything. Make sure that this is your true wish."

Nachiketa replied with a question: "Will not all of these return to your kingdom soon enough?"

Lord Yama had to nod. "Yes. For all of these things are temporal, are impermanent. They rise for a time and they pass away."

So Lord Yama said, "Then I will give you your answer." And he brought Nachiketa an extraordinary gift—a beautiful mirror, handcrafted there in the underworld. He said, "I place this mirror in your hand, and with it pose a question to you that will be the gateway to immortality itself. The question I pose for you is: Who am I, really? Look deeply in this mirror and see."

It is what the Zen masters ask when they say, "Who are you?" Or "What is this life, this great mystery of life?" And you sit with that koan day and night. What is this? Who am I?

But it happens in a moment when you go into the bathroom and look in the mirror and notice your body has aged, that the fur is missing in some parts, that it droops in other parts. You know how it is. Wrinkles are coming. It's changing its shape. But even though you notice that your body has changed, there's that strange experience that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that. And that's because it's only your body that has aged. But the consciousness, the loving awareness, the witness of it, who you really are—in that moment steps back and says, "Hmm, how's this body doing in this incarnation? Oh, it's sagging here and it's learning there and it's getting this way or that way." You start to see that who you are is not this body, but the awareness itself. You become the witness, the consciousness itself.

This is from Be Here Now, speaking of Ram Dass. He says, "As we awaken, we watch the entire drama of our lives. We watch the illusion with unbearable compassion. For you are all form, you are breath, you are the river, you are the void, the desire and the illusion and the awakening beyond it. For you are beyond space and time, nothing and everything. Everything is me. And we see it all form in eternity as a miracle. Then you enter the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands. You chop wood and carry water." You return to the world to be in the world, but not of the world.

And in all that you're going through, the difficulties and the fears, know that this is not the end of the story. We human beings have been through earthquakes and floods, tornadoes and tsunamis, and epochs that include epidemics and pandemics over the centuries. And we've survived. It's in our genes. It's in our cells. It's in your nervous system and in your collective memory and in your heart. And it was passed on to you by your ancestors and their ancestors, generation after generation. We know how to do this.

And when you get quiet and you receive the boons that Nachiketa has asked for—the loving and forgiving heart, the courage that is not an absence of fear but the courage to be true to yourself and what matters, even when fear arises—and then you remember who you are, the great heart of compassionate self, you get still and quiet.

And this from my beloved Trudy, who wrote: "When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say to yourself, 'It looks like the end of the world.' What you're seeing is love in action. What you're seeing in that negative space is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, our parents, our brothers, our sisters. Protecting people we will never meet. People will lose their jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses and some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment when you're out on a walk or on your way to the store or watching the news to look into the emptiness and marvel at all that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn't the end of the world. It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness."

And when Nachiketa had received this third blessing and looked deeply into the mirror to ask, "Who am I really?" and could see that he was in fact consciousness itself—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Since before time, I've been free. Birth and death are only doors through which I pass. This body is not me. I am life without boundaries. I've never been born and never died"—he stepped out of the land of the Lord of Death into the unborn, into the timeless world, into the loving consciousness that gives birth to all that we really are, that was born into your body. And you could see the world with the eyes of love and return to it then, like the old man in the Zen pictures going back into the marketplace with his wine bottle and his staff, saying, "All I look upon with love become enlightened."

For something then becomes holy. Every spring crocus and newborn fawn and plum and apple blossom. I watched my year-and-a-half-old grandson pick up a pebble—and he could stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon or the biggest marvel of the world and say, "Look, look at this red pebble. It's a mystery. Isn't it beautiful?" showing it to Baba and Nini, his grandparents.

I believe it was in *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman said a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. Just the existence of life—ours and others on this planet among the vast galaxies. And here we are.

Yes, we've been through pandemics and epidemics. And what Nachiketa realized was that there was something bigger and more beautiful that he could find. And it wasn't just in the vastness, but in the tenderness between people, in what we touch and how we listen.

A poem by James Davis May:

Even on the night my friend died, even on that night, the feral cat, the one that's white and fluffy, still crossed our driveway quietly from our neighbor's pines to our own rhododendrons. Even on that night, she would look for some rodent or bird to terrorize. And I, drinking and grieving on our deck, was appalled by the

world and its gross refusal to stop being the world. And then embarrassed, not just by my own naivete, but by innate human sickness that believes we matter, that something or someone is listening. That civility isn't just something we imagined and don't really follow anyway. That night, I wanted everything to be better than it is. So I went to the fridge, got out the milk, poured it into a little bowl, which I left on the porch and found empty the next morning.

And this is what we have, really. We have gestures of kindness and greatness of heart. We have forgiveness. We have the compassion that can hold all those who are living and all those who are frightened. And we know that we can do this together. And one day the sun shall rise, and the numbers will not.

I hope what I've offered you—the practice that we did together in the beginning, which in a way was the complete teachings for tonight, and then the bedtime story, a story to feed some other part of your being—serves as a reminder, as a possibility, as a soothing and steadying, as an awakening. I hope it has been food for the heart.

I thank you for being part of this, for offering your goodness to the world, and I encourage you to see what you can do and to be that one steady one on the boat, as Thich Nhat Hanh says.

I also encourage you, if you can, to please help support Spirit Rock so we can continue getting these teachings out. There's a donate button, there are ways to become members. I encourage you to feel part of the community, because you are, and we are together.

And I encourage you to take your time at the end of the day to sit quietly and tend your own body and heart and mind with loving awareness. At the beginning of the day, to settle yourself and set your best intention. And in little bits throughout the day—after you clean the stove and walk the dog or diaper the child or answer the email or go on endless Zoom until you become Zoom-crazed—take a breath and feel yourself on the earth. Let your heart soften. Hold it all with compassion. Say thank you for trying to protect me and take care of me. And live in a great heart of love.

It is your birthright. It is who you really are.

Thank you, and good night.

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