Wonder, Mystery, Awe, Gratitude

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 50:35

When I ring the bell, I realize I miss ringing that great big bell at Spirit Rock on Monday night that calls everybody together. It's one of my favorite things to hit that huge bowl bell and have it resonate for so many people. But I'm hoping the meditation had some resonance for you. In the dialogue afterward, I'll get a sense of whether this was valuable or not, whether that kind of envisioning in that form of compassion and loving kindness worked for you. I hope so, in some way.

I invite you to listen, not so much to be taught—spare you that—but at best to be reminded of something that you already know, or to reflect in some way on what matters. And to reflect on what are the teachings of wisdom or understanding that can help us, especially in this kind of wild time.

Here we are, post-election, or semi-post-election, it looks like, and I have this feeling it's like a Greek play. I can't tell whether it's a comedy or a tragedy. There's the Greek chorus singing in the wings, all of the different social media adding their voices to it. For some, it looks like it's playing out as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described with denial, anger, and bargaining—all of that going on, wherever you are. It's a really confusing time.

And then here we are, Thanksgiving week, the big harvest festival. We're about to go into the so-called holiday, holy day season and the winter solstice. But it's all confusing. And it's all made of these paradoxes that aren't easily solved.

Here we are in our politics these days. Are we supposed to be taking care of ourselves? Should we leave the international world? Should we interact with it more fully and take care of it? Here we are, social beings. But if you are among the 50 million people who watched that movie, The Social Dilemma, which talked about the problems with technology, we have the blessings of Zoom and all the great things from technology—and all the problems that it creates for teenage girls looking at their bodies through the magnifying toxic influence of social media, or the misuse of it politically.

And then we have our families, which are a source of both joy and blessing and trouble. Since Jesus and Buddha had trouble with their families, you know it's just part of being human. And that's how it is. Love and difficulty.

Maybe you're creative and you're an artist. But is it a society that even supports artists? What's your role? The individual, the collective. We're supposed to be in the land of the free. But what does that mean? What is freedom?

Nelson Mandela, when he got out of 27 years in Robben Island prison and stood up in front of the new

nation, the re-made nation of South Africa with such magnanimity and graciousness and wisdom—he spoke of freedom. He said, "You are not yet free," when he looked at everyone there. He said, "You merely have the freedom to be free." Kind of an amazing statement. You are not yet free. You merely have the freedom to be free, to take that freedom and do what you will with it.

Here we are in a time that's crying for racial and social justice. You see those statues of the goddess Justice holding the scales with a blindfold on, to be blind. But now there's another meaning for that blindness of justice—to not see, and have been blind for years, decades, maybe centuries to the injustice built into the very system that she serves.

What do we do with all this? How do we navigate the blessings, the paradoxes, the difficulties of it?

When I was in elementary school, 65 or 70 years ago, they taught us about Thanksgiving and we made those turkeys that you cut out like your hand. They gave us the childhood story of how the good pilgrims and the good Indians came together and ate turkey—that mythological story for our harvest festival. And yet we know, honestly, when we look at the genocide of the Native Americans, of the First Nations, that was really woven into that story. What happened to them at the hands of those who came from Europe to conquer, and in most cases to kill. And yet what we've lost—their wisdom of the land and the environment and the animals and the plants and the wisdom of community that the Iroquois nation bequeathed to the framers of the Constitution.

So how do we navigate all of this?

The gratitude of Thanksgiving. I'm just thankful that it's a holiday where we don't give presents. We don't have to go shopping for Thanksgiving. And yet the tragedy that's woven into it.

I would suggest some words for us: wonder, mystery, awe, gratitude.

Let me read you a poem from Mary Oliver, one of our great dharma poet laureates.

This morning, two mockingbirds in the green field were spinning and tossing the white ribbons of their songs into the air, and I had nothing better to do than listen. I mean this seriously.

In Greece, a long time ago, an old couple opened their door to two strangers who were, it soon appeared, not men at all, but gods. It's my favorite story—how the old couple had almost nothing to give but their willingness to be attentive. And for this alone the gods loved them and blessed them.

When they rose out of their mortal bodies like a million particles of water from a fountain, the light swept into all the corners of the cottage, and the old couple, shaken with understanding, bowed down. But still they asked for nothing but the difficult life which they had already. And the gods smiled as they vanished, clapping their great wings.

Whatever it was I was supposed to be this morning, whatever it was I said I would be doing, I was standing

at the edge of the field. I was hurrying through my own soul, opening the doors. I was leaning out. I was listening.

She writes about that story, I think it's from Ovid, of Baucis and Philemon, the two in that cottage, and how they were blessed in a different way by the gods. But they were blessed because they gave this extraordinary gift. The gods apparently had gone to many other houses—you know how these myths work—in the form of asking for food, asking for something, to be taken care of, and they were turned away. Then finally at this door, this old couple welcomed them. They became, like Rumi wrote in that poem you all know so well, they became the guest house to welcome each visitor. And they offered what Mary Oliver describes as the great gift, which is the gift of attention.

When somebody asks for a little attention, it's actually not a small thing. It's what makes the gods smile. When we're actually able to pay attention in that way, it lets us see something entirely different.

When my beloved Trudy was young—she told this story when we were teaching together the other day—when she was a young mother and her daughter was two and a half years old, she was living in Geneva near her parents. Her dad worked for the WHO as one of their top doctors for the health of the world. Her daughter got very sick with the most virulent form of meningitis and went into a coma, if you can imagine, and was in the hospital for almost two months.

Toward the end of that time, when it got as bad as it got, she coded. Which simply means that everybody has to rush to the side of that person because they're not sure they'll make it. Trudy described sitting there with this little body of her daughter that she'd been sitting with for weeks, living on a cot next to her in that hospital, praying, worried the way only a mother could.

She said, "I saw all these people—the nurses and the doctors and the people trying to put needles into her tiny little veins. And then all of a sudden, the room filled with light, like that cottage." She said, "And I, who never really thought about God or what God was—I saw God. And it was those nurses. Those doctors. Those people at the bedside."

Even as we speak, there are hundreds of thousands of acts of generosity and goodness, billions of them around the world, where we are tending one another as human beings.

As a monk, every morning when we would come into the dharma hall, still in the dark before dawn, and light candles and do our morning chanting, part of the chants were a blessing chant of thanks and gratitude for the food we had, for the garments we were given to wear, for the shelter of our place, for the community around us—that we might remember every day this gratitude. And then we might set our intention and dedicate ourselves from all that's been given. Part of these chants were really a reflection to sense that we are part of a deeper order of things.

Doris was a fifty-something single mom with three teenagers and a budding career, but she was plagued with anxiety. One of her daughter's best friends had committed suicide. Another was struggling with her

sexual identity. She, as a mother, was full of worry, full of fears and indecision and panic. She said, "When I learned about mindfulness, it touched me. It made sense, so I went on a retreat."

The silence and the peace were blissful. I think about that—leaving the three teenagers and going off on retreat. Ah, thank you. No decisions to make, only to be present and kind to myself.

What came first was a subtle change in the perception of who I am. I realized my heart had atrophied, and I'd held a lot of fear and pain inside, which prevented me from giving love to myself and others. I practiced a gentle acceptance of aspects of myself that I'd rejected and now felt grateful to know. This gentle opening over the days left me less caught in suffering. I began to trust myself, being fallible and human, and yet so much more.

Then what I call the little miracle happened. I was on a slow, mindful walk, totally quiet. And then I disappeared. There was no one—only vast silence and the wind. It became a day of joyful, amazing freedom. And now I know that I'm so much bigger than my fears. Some days I can still feel that vast expanse. And others, I'm still standing on the sidelines. But all I have to do is unfold my arms and step forward into life, and I'm free again.

In a moment, we can shift our identity and step out of what's called the body of fear. We can release what we've carried—we can be so loyal to our suffering—and become something bigger.

Many years ago, in the late seventies, I was invited to the Menninger Foundation. One portion of the Menninger Foundation was a group that was studying altered consciousness and unusual phenomena. And of course, they invited me—you know, that's how it works. It was all the meditation people and the shamans and that sort of thing. We had our conference and sharing and all the things you would expect in such a gathering.

One of the people there was a man named Mad Bear, an Iroquois medicine man. We were each invited to give teachings. I offered a talk and guided meditation. But Mad Bear said, "I can't give teachings in here. Come with me."

He led us out the door to the outdoors of Kansas—huge skies and fields of corn, vast vistas. We stood there in a rough circle in the fields nearby. And then he began to make a prayer.

My goodness, he went on for a long time, that prayer. I kept thinking, when is he going to finish? He's praying and praying. It went on and on, for perhaps forty-five minutes. But as I stayed with it and listened, I began to feel something so different. It wasn't a prayer—it was his gratitude. Gratitude for the people and the animals and the plants and the insects, for the creatures of the sky and the sea, for the air and the water, the fire and the earth, and all their joyful exertions that bless us every day. He gave gratitude to the care and labor of a thousand generations of ancestors and elders that came before us on that land and other lands across the earth. Gratitude for our safety and well-being and whatever health we have. Gratitude for our friends and family and community.

And then he became very particular, and he went down to the earth. Gratitude for Mother Earth for holding us so we don't fly off into space. Gratitude for that which lives within Mother Earth—for the web of life under the soil, the worms and the rhizomes, the wood wide web of the trees sending their sugar to their offspring and to the other trees, which we now know about. Gratitude to the birds—oh, he did the little birds first, those that would come near, and then the great birds. Gratitude for the animals of that land, for the buffalo that were still there in our imagination, even when we couldn't see them. Gratitude for the clouds and the sunlight.

By the time he was done, it was as if he'd offered this long practice of loving-kindness and mindfulness and mystery of this earth. We all went back inside slightly altered and happier than when we'd walked out, connected with one another.

The unseen world.

My dear friend Sylvia Boorstein, colleague at Spirit Rock, said that her main practice at one point had become simply saying thank you. To whatever arose, thank you. Thank you, like the poet says, thank you, dark though it is.

I sat with her when she told me that, and I challenged her. I said, "Thank you to everything?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Sylvia, how about the Holocaust?" Because she had lost family in the Holocaust. She got very quiet. She looked up and she said, "No thank you."

And there was something wise in that. It even had a thank you there.

Your gratitude grows. In Tibet, in Vajrayana practice, you pray for suffering. Grant that I may have enough suffering that my cold or defended or frightened or shamed or grieving heart can become the great heart of compassion. Gratitude for our tears, a kind of humility and grace.

I think about the movie of John Lewis, the great elder who recently passed, who worked tirelessly for racial justice. The title of the movie, he called it *Good Trouble*. And I think that's what the Tibetans pray for. May I be given good trouble.

And I found when I sat last week, as I do each time and get quieter, that my own personal tears became, after a while, what's called the tears of the way. Not the tears because we've had our own personal griefs and losses—which I have had, and so have you—but the tears that connect us.

And so there I was. I have a tiny little writer's cottage hidden up in the trees above Spirit Rock. Fortunately it has a heater and running water, so I can stay there. And it was wonderful to be there. And my mind started to get a little bit quiet, and I got a bit more aware. And as I would get quiet, I would also see my personality kick in.

When I was first in the Peace Corps, learning, getting prepared to work on these tropical medical teams in the Mekong River Valley, they gave all of us a Thai name as I was learning to speak Thai. And these

teachers looked at me and they called me Mr. Doing, because I was always doing something.

And so there I was sitting, feeling loving kindness and vastness, and my mind would kick in. And it had ideas and plans and things that I'm going to do. I'm on these boards, you know, I'm working for immigrant rights and I'm on a board for this huge climate change thing, and I'm involved in a project that's trying to change the way technology is working in a healthy way—all these kinds of things. Mr. Doing.

And then I just had to say, oh, there he is. There's Jack. Kind of bow and say, yeah, he's done some pretty good things, but that's not who I really am. But it's nice. I get this incarnation. It's actually a pretty blessed one. I get to do some good things. But I need to hold it all.

And as I let myself quiet, then actually deeper tears came, and they weren't about me. They were for the friends whose child died of an overdose. And the people I know in communities of color that have been hit so hard by COVID.

And the tears for the loss of the rainforests.

And then one day a peacock came. I hadn't seen peacocks at Spirit Rock until this year, but I guess once we got out of the way, they decided they were going to come and visit. It came right up to my cabin and kind of pecked on the door a little bit while I was sitting. I said, thank you. Thank you for the marvelous visit.

And little by little, there was a shift—not only holding the mind, which does its thing, and the personality, the body. My body was tenser than I'd remembered or felt when I got there. But when I sat still, it reminded me, and gradually it unwound. And mostly there was just a shift, not just of a vastness, but also a shift of love. That all of it was fine. That all of it was intended—as a human being—to be part of our incarnation in some way, to be held with understanding.

Dear friends, the Buddhist texts begin, "O nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, do not forget who you really are. Do not forget your true nature."

And so we have these practices. You have them. I have them. We share them. And they open us to our true nature. They open the heart to hold the entire world with mindful loving awareness and compassion.

And of course all these studies—the eight thousand papers and studies from the neuroscientists of the last few decades on these trainings—they explain, as my friend Dan Siegel the neuroscientist calls it, that one of the gifts is expanding the window of tolerance. Like Rumi's guest house again, learning to treat each guest honorably, to receive what life offers us with some sense of gratitude.

Here's the deal. You got a human incarnation, like me. It will include majestic suffering. "Overcome all bitterness because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain that was entrusted to you," said the Sufis. Like the mother of the world who carries a certain measure of that cosmic pain in your heart, you're called upon to meet it in compassion and not self-pity.

And it has to be this way. If there's birth, there has to be death. If there's light, there's also dark. If there's a beginning, there's an end. If there's gain, there's loss. This is called duality. This is incarnation—pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, praise and blame. It's what we are. It's what manifests out of nothing into a world of form and emptiness.

Trouble? Somebody asked Zorba. "Life is trouble," he said. This is the first noble truth of the Buddha. You can't avoid suffering. This is dukkha, this is suffering. But suffering is not the end of the story. This we know too.

The man was my age but looked many years older. He was an Army veteran. He was also homeless, cold, and hungry. I could see he had tried to wash up before coming to the social services department to ask for help. His face and hands were clean, but his clothes were filthy. Though he claimed not to have had any alcohol that day, the smell of it seeped from his pores.

I wanted to get him into rehab, and I asked if he was ready to come in off the streets.

"No, ma'am," he said. "All I'd like is a few dollars, some bus tickets. If I can get sober enough, they'll let me into the shelter across town."

That shelter had fifty beds—cots really. The homeless were admitted at night and forced out at dawn to eat breakfast at a nearby charity. Fifty beds and nearly a thousand homeless just in this part of the city.

Winters here in Northern California mean cold, rain, and mud. Even though this man and many like him slept under bridges to keep dry, the dampness penetrated everything. His clothes and the bedroll he placed on the floor smelled moldy. The pages of the book he carried were swollen.

I asked him how many times he had tried rehab. "Two or three," he said. "Long time ago." Maybe it's time to try again, I suggested. I explained I'd had a client who'd gone through the program seven times before it took. Besides, I said, we're months away from warmer weather. What else have you got going on?

I watched his face as he considered my offer. I thought I saw a flicker of hope in his eyes, followed by a shadow of doubt. He'd tried before. It had been hard—impossibly hard—so he was living on the streets. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at me. I reached for the phone. "Shall I?" I asked. He barely nodded yes.

An hour later, I handed him over to a recovering alcoholic, also a veteran, who would drive him to one of the best rehab facilities in the county. "Come visit me when you graduate," I said as they left. I barely recognized the man when he came into my office six months later—so tall and handsome, smelling like the outdoors, and holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

With your own good hearts, you are asked to learn to trust, to do what Martin Luther King Jr. said: to turn the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

In traditional cultures, this trust is learned through initiation. It's part of every wise and traditional culture—deliberate initiations of facing danger or death in some way to find something deeper. You all know the stories of the Maasai sending a young man out with a spear to kill his first lion and come back acclaimed in the village as a man. The Mayans had these amazing initiations for men and women. The boys who were sent out—one of the tasks they had was to come back into the village and steal the grandmother's cooking pot. And the women in the village knew they would be coming back and all had sticks to beat this person. It was really a tricky thing to be able to get the pot.

I think about my dear friend who went through a whole series of very powerful initiations as a youngish man in his twenties, and then again later. I said, "Well, these initiations—they're supposed to make you a man or prepare you for something, or a woman fully. What do they really prepare you for?" He laughed and said, "When you complete an initiation, it prepares you for the next initiation." And that's how life is, you know.

One of the famous Inuit shamans sent a young woman who had many visions out to become a shaman like herself and put her out in a little igloo on an ice floe for thirty days with a bit of water and one small dried fish. She said, "I kind of died in there," as you can imagine. She had her vision. She said, "I died a little"—that was her phrase. But we all have to. We all have our initiations if we accept them.

Karlfried Dürckheim, the Zen teacher, writes: "The person who, really being on the way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to that friend who offers them refuge and comfort and encourages 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."

Maybe—maybe—out of our political gridlock and suffering today, some new capacities will be born out of this dark night. Maybe we'll move from independence to interdependence, from self-centeredness to thanksgiving.

I like this poem by Heather Altfeld, although I changed it a lot. She wrote a poem about the balance between counting ballots and counting what truly matters:

The last of them there waiting to be counted. Think of them shoveled into piles like old snow. I imagine them in the late night of those rooms, lingering in the smell of yesterday's lunch, in the tepid air with the breath held back by masks. The ballots talking among themselves about the ludicrous folly of humans who should be counting the vanishing whales and tigers. Who should be counting the mountain gorillas and orangutans and the almost-lost ring-tailed lemur and the gopher tortoise. Who should be counting the children behind bars. Who should be voting for phone lines demanding a raise in the minimum age for kindness, demanding a vote on the statutory limitations on human cruelty—a referendum to redeem our cities from an endless migration of sadness and despair. Call it now, she ends. Call it for the rivers, the trees, the rocks.

Call it for the rain, who knows far better than we how to become a fierce and gentle blessing. Vote for the goodness touching us all.

Reflect for a moment as you listen. When did you find trust? What awakened it in you? That sense of the indestructible, the inviolable. You have it, you know. When did you find trust?

Dear friends, the last piece of what I'd like to say. We're all at the crossroads. All of us. And the crossroads is this moment that has infinity, the reality of the present, the eternal now. What will we do at the crossroads? Who are we? What's true is that we're never alone.

There's a story of a young, pious nun who used to go into prayer, raise her eyes, pray and pray, and then came to the Mother Superior and said, "I can't find God. I don't know where to find God." And the Mother Superior looked back at her and said, "You haven't found God, my dear, because you haven't looked down." It's like truly seeing God in the bodies of those nurses and doctors.

"Everything is waiting for you," writes David Whyte. "The great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Put down the weight of your aloneness 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 see the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."

When I teach and people bring up the sufferings and struggles and difficulties in their life—the shame they carry or guilt for not doing enough for the world, the addiction in their family line, the death of a child or parent, having a new baby and instead of being joyful they're overwhelmed—I'll ask them, "What have you learned about how to handle this? What have you learned from this?" And often they answer something good. Then I turn to the group and say, "What have you all learned?" And a kind of magic happens because the room becomes wise. It's not me or some teaching. It's the shared hearts of everyone together. The room becomes wise. And they remind you from their hearts that you belong, that they've been through it too. They remind you that your being is enough. That you are enough.

We've been training for this difficult time for many years, you know. There'll be more difficult times, as there have been. But we've been training to do this. And as human beings, we've been training for thousands of generations through pandemics and earthquakes and floods and difficulties and hurricanes and cyclones and loss. We've been training.

I love the story of Thomas Merton when he went on his last pilgrimage to India and Southeast Asia, to the lands of the Buddha, when he met with the Dalai Lama and various other sages. He went to Polonnaruwa, an ancient temple in Sri Lanka, where a huge cliff of marble stone had been carved into giant Buddhas with great faces—a whole cliff. He said he stood there and gazed at those faces, and to him it was the most moving work of art he'd ever seen. Because in those eyes, in those faces brought alive, he saw the eyes of infinite compassion and a wise heart that rejected nothing, that understood it all, and whose response was

emptiness, vastness, and boundless compassion.

The words of the Buddha: "There are those who discover they can leave behind destructive reactions and become patient as the earth, unmoved by fires of anger or fear, unshaken as a pillar, unperturbed as a clear and quiet pool." This is who you are.

I like to say, go look in the mirror. You look in the mirror and you notice you've aged. Losing fur in some places, getting extra fur in other places, sagging and wrinkling in some ways. As my dear, beloved friend Wes—the dharma teacher and commentator on life—says, "The hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard." All these strange things of aging happen. It's just how it is. But there's a strange thing as you look in the mirror.

And that is that you don't necessarily feel much older. You know that? There's the body aging, but actually, I don't feel that. This is so common. And that's because it's only the body that's aged. In that moment of gazing in the mirror, you are becoming what Ajahn Chah called the one who knows—the witnessing, the loving awareness, the mindful loving awareness itself that steps out of identity with the body and rests in the vastness of consciousness and says, "Hmm, it's getting a bit older, that body, isn't it?" Just how it happens.

And there's an understanding in that moment. You become like the Buddha, you become the awakened one who sees with the eyes of understanding, of compassion. You become grateful as you open. Gratitude, mercy—when you look with mindful loving awareness, a mysterious love for it all arises, for the whole of human incarnation. The full catastrophe, as Zorba said. Yes, he had it all, and he danced, and he loved it.

When a baby's born, we all go, "Ooh, baby, baby," and hold it. That new baby smell and that incredible feeling of this little being that's just popped out of—good heavens—her or his mother's body and become, "Here I am, another human being on the planet." Amazing. There's so much love for babies that come in.

And when someone is ready to die and we're fortunate enough to be with them, we hold their hand as they're ready to pass as a gesture of the only thing that matters—a gesture of love. We start with love. We end with love. In fact, that's what you are. It is who you really are. You are loving awareness itself.

So take time to be quiet in this little holiday as best you can. Walk in nature. Sit. Meditate. Do your loving-kindness or your compassion or whatever practice you do. It is the sweet oil that eases the hinge to the gate into the garden inside. You can always go there, says the poet.

It is time for Thanksgiving. So reflect for a moment. Maybe let your eyes close just for a minute. I ask you: What are you most grateful for? And what gives you trust in these difficult times? Where have you learned trust? And what gift are you longing to give to the world?

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