Rekindle and Renew | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 40:44

So hello again after our meditation.

Before I talk or offer any teachings tonight, I want to remind you that the teachings are really not something to believe. They're a kind of meditation or reflection. At their best, they remind you of something that you already know. At their worst, just throw them away. They're not right for you, or maybe not right at all. So you get to have a kind of discernment and really use them, if anything, just to tune to your own wisdom and your own love.

I'd like to start by lighting a candle—it's an electronic candle. Nevertheless, it's a wonderful one, like the one we found at Ram Dass's house, now from Costco, with a little flickering wick in it. Trudy picked them up and it's just great.

I want to light a candle to honor this special day because it's a time coming close to the winter solstice. Today is also a day of the new moon and a full solar eclipse if you were down in Chile and South America. It's also the time of the Geminid meteor showers. Trudy and I went out last night late, looked up in the middle of the sky and waited, and sure enough every minute or so another falling star would show itself silently. That's true for a few more nights—it's the best meteor shower of the year.

I remember when I've had the opportunity to look through a big telescope and see what seemed like points of light in the sky. There was Jupiter, and then you could see the moons going around Jupiter. There was Mercury, and you could see its pockmarked face like the face of our moon. Or Venus moving. In some way there was a magic in it because there was a sense of this slow and elegant—I think the phrase is the music of the spheres—this dance of the orbs that we are a part of. Just as you could feel the trust of your breath breathing in and out, I could somehow feel the dance of the spheres and the music as part of this whole organic tapestry of light and life that's given us our lives.

And of course, all over the Northern Hemisphere now, there are rituals like Christmas and Hanukkah lights and Kwanzaa and Persian festivals and ones in Muslim and Indian traditions and so forth for the solstice—the time for renewal, the time for celebration, a time for trusting that the light will return.

This is really important right now for us to feel, not just to see it or think of it. Vaccines are being distributed today in the US for the first time, and there's the light of the end of the pandemic, even if it's going to be a tough winter. We can see the end of it. And here in California where there's been such a long fire season, we've had beautiful rains in Northern California—the end of the fire season for now.

Like the poet Deena Metzger says: "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 turning of the seasons is the beginning of something new, the beginning of the end of the pandemic and the fire season. It's also, this very day, the Electoral College's work to appoint our next President of the United States, President Biden. In spite of some pretty nutty conspiracy things that were out there, we can take a breath and say, ah, the democratic process of the polls has come to a conclusion that was fair. Somehow we can trust maybe that in this new year, no matter how divided we are, and despite the incredible pain that still exists from racism and economic injustice and caste systems and all of those kinds of things—we're beginning to feel our hearts and collective will move toward the healing, toward the wellbeing of humans and the world around us.

So I'd like to tell a story tonight. You know, I'm a storyteller. It's just what I do. Ram Dass once told me I tell too many stories. I looked at him and said, "Ram Dass, this is the pot and the kettle, you know?"

But here's a story for you. The thing about stories is that they're not just stories. The old stories—and this is an old Chinese story—their word *story* also means *storehouse*. They carry within them, these stories that have been told for centuries, a whole storehouse of understanding and wisdom. So I'll let you sense what's in the storehouse. I'll unpack it in my way, but maybe you'll find other treasures.

Once upon a time, as the story is told, and it's told to be a true story, there was a family that lived in a village along a river in west central China. The father of this family, who was a farmer and basically a good man, married a woman from the village and they had two daughters. When the first daughter was six years old, she got ill and died, which broke the heart of her mother, who also fell ill that year and died. Now the father was left with one daughter only, and she became the light of his life. Her name was Sam, or Sanjo, and she was a lovely little child.

He did everything for her, and she liked to play. Her favorite playmate was a distant cousin who lived nearby in the village, Ochu. They played together so well. He was a handsome little boy and they just enjoyed each other. Even the father would say, watching them and seeing how they enjoyed themselves, "You'd make a good marriage when you grow up." Somehow in their little children's hearts, which are very tender and listen very carefully to what the big people say, they believed that they were engaged.

Then it came, as she grew older, time for her to get married. Her father, seeking the best hand for her, found a young man, Henryo, from a very good family and told her that this was who she would marry. She was shocked and heartbroken. And she told Ochu, "I can't marry you."

My father is marrying me off to Henryu.

And Ochu could barely stand it as well. You can imagine after all those years of their play and love. He wept, she wept, cast down and depressed.

And Ochu, unable to bear the pain, put his meager belongings into a small boat, said to his parents, "I can't

stay here anymore," and set off down the river that went through the village.

Seijo was so heartbroken herself that she ran away. She ran down the path alongside the river, crying and weeping and calling out. And Ochu heard this voice, this familiar voice. "Oh, Seijo, it's you, it's you!" And he pulled over and she stepped into the boat. They hugged each other and set off down the river, running away, eloping to go to the next province far away and start a new life.

When they got there, this handsome and beautiful new couple found a small place to live. Someone took them in, they began to work and farm and help, and pretty soon they had their own children, a little boy and a little girl.

But over the years, over the first few years of these children's lives, Seijo and her husband Ochu began to feel more and more that there was something wrong, that they had hurt their parents by fleeing. And Seijo especially needed to return, she said, to ask forgiveness of her father.

So they found a boat again and put themselves in it and went back up the river, finally landing at the dock just by her old father's house. Ochu got out first and went to knock at the door. The astonished father, who looked so much older and so tired, saw him. Ochu said, "We've come back. I brought Seijo with me to see you. We want to see you. We want to ask your forgiveness."

The father's eyes grew wide and he said, "This is impossible. This is impossible. You can't bring her with you. She is here. She's been here all along. In fact, when you left, she took to her bed and has not spoken a word since then. We feed her, but she will not say a word, and she has not gotten up for five years. You can look in there and see her."

Ochu took a peek and he said, "Father, she is in the boat. You must come with me."

The father first sent his servant, who nodded yes, and invited Seijo to follow the servant back to the house. The father's eyes grew even wider as he saw his daughter now coming back toward him, older. "Who is this?" he said. "Who could you be?"

And as she walked toward the house, the Seijo that lay in the bed heard this voice and sat up and stood up. The two Seijos walked toward one another until they came together as one and laughed and cried. They brought the two children from the boat and hugged her father and said, "These are your grandchildren." And they all stood there in wonder.

That tenderness is the end of the story.

Now, of course, there are many levels to a story. This story has been told in the great Zen text, the Mumonkan. The question it often asks is: who is your true self? Sometimes it's called "Seijo Loses Her Soul." The question for us is: can we come back? Can we come back to ourselves?

For we live in a culture, if you think about it and look, that's really split. You remember that line from

James Joyce where he wrote, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." And so we have our kids sitting at desks all day long or watching a screen now, because that's all they can do in the pandemic, when half the time they should be out running and playing in the playground, in the woods, living the life of a child in some physical way.

We've split ourselves off, not only from our bodies, but from the bodies of others. You can drive through the streets of our cities and see the homeless encampments and the people in tents. Or the 800,000 or one million DACA children who were brought here as young children and are now threatened to be sent back to places they don't know, languages they don't speak.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said of modern society, how it looked to him: "Lost in thought, separated from one another."

I know when I come back to the US after I've traveled to other countries—warm Latin countries or my favorite places in Asia or in Africa, where the men hold hands and put their arms around each other, where they're not so homophobic, where they love each other, where that's not scary to the men, to be tender and close with each other—I feel when I come back, "Oh, I'm back in the cold north." You know what I'm talking about.

And COVID, of course, has highlighted it and made it more so.

And then our crazy divided politics, where we are split and separated. There's a kind of toxic nostalgia that divides us even more—the legacy of our history of white supremacy, the imagined past of the 1950s where women knew their place. That kind of toxic nostalgia, or the 1850s where people of color knew their place. We're still fighting that civil war. In many ways, we're in exile from one another.

But there's another possibility. And in your heart, you all know this.

This is part of a little story that my daughter wrote for her nonprofit, Oasis in Berkeley, which works to get asylum for LGBT people from around the world whose lives are in danger. She said: "Our clients and staff provide me with inspiration. I'm reminded of a young law student from Saudi Arabia, Mariam, who was attending law school in the Bay Area and volunteered to help at Oasis. She was accompanying Elena, a transgender woman from El Salvador, to her asylum interview, despite Mariam's own conflicted cultural feelings around sexual orientation and gender identity—quite different from Elena's. But Mariam was professional, courteous, and respectful as she prepared the client for the hearing. She didn't engage in small talk during the BART ride on what would be one of the most difficult days in Elena's life. Mariam and Elena sat silently in a sterile waiting room. The asylum officer was running late. One hour, then two hours went by.

"Finally Elena pulled out her phone and showed Mariam a photo of her Pomeranian, Lily. Mariam's face lit up—she too had a Pomeranian, named Ali. They traded photos and stories and soon moved on to their love of jewel-studded high heels and Louis Vuitton purses. Mariam taught Elena about the abaya she was

wearing.

"By the time the officer was ready, four hours later, Elena's fear had receded and Mariam was whispering reassuring cheers as they walked into the room. Standing outside the station at the end of the day, they held hands and each thanked the other. Elena had won asylum, escaping almost certain death if she returned to El Salvador, and Mariam was preparing to return to her life in Saudi Arabia. They would likely never meet again, but my heart was moved as I watched how each had a profound impact on the other's life."

Though these times can feel dark, we must remember that when we're able to sit down and talk to one another, to see the world through another's eyes and believe in our common humanity, there is hope.

Mindful loving awareness, no matter the darkness, is an invitation to trust—to know that it's never too late to start again. We don't know the full extent of our exile until we stop. Maybe when you meditate, or you pause and let yourself return back to your own body and heart because you've been too busy and too pulled upon by the culture and divided—like Seijo, you come back to yourself. And when you do, often the tears need to come.

The Buddha commended this in one of his stories, where he told his monks about a great elephant that had been captured in the forest and brought to the king to be the lead elephant in the king's army. It was the great father of the elephants in the forest. They began to train it, and it was a magnificent creature. The king would visit, but when it was time to get ready for military campaigns, the elephant would not move.

The king asked the elephant trainer, "What's happened?"

The trainer said, "I was trying to figure it out myself. I got word from those who brought elephants to the palace that this elephant's old mother has been sick. This great elephant had been bringing her food, and now it must be worried about her."

So the king went to the elephant and said, "We will bring your mother here and provide her with food every day." And they did. The majestic elephant then was happy and led the king's forces and parades.

At the end of telling the story, the Buddha said, "When you tell this story, the hearts of those who hear it are softened. Now they can hear the Dharma. Now they can hear what is true."

So when we start to pay attention and begin to listen, part of that listening may be difficult. As in this story, maybe the first part is to feel our tears, to feel the losses, to feel the exile from one another, to feel the division in the culture.

I was listening to Paul Simon sing "American Tune," which Trudy, Teja, and I would sometimes sing at the end of retreats we led at Spirit Rock. It's such a wonderful song. There's a verse I find very poignant for these times, where he sings: "I don't know a soul who's not been battered. I don't have a friend who feels

at ease. I don't know a dream that's not been shattered or driven to its knees—yet it's all right." And in another line he says, "We come in the age's most uncertain hour." He's a beautiful poet. The age's most uncertain hour.

You see, our practice of presence, of mindful loving awareness, is not one of having some special attainment, some special state—those come and go. And it's not a grim duty to meditate. It's an invitation of tenderness and courage, of intimacy and wonder.

To trust that it's possible to become intimate with all things, as Zen Master Dogen says—even in exile, even in the darkest night of the year—that our attention itself is what knits us back together.

And we can start with our body, the dignity of your body. We've been so separated, many of us, from our bodies. And it's time to listen. The great playwright Molière writes, "All the ills of humankind, all the tragic misfortunes that fill the history books, all the political blunders, all the failures of the great leaders have arisen merely from a lack of skill at dancing." There's something so beautiful and deep and comedic in this, as Molière was, but also true. What does it mean to actually inhabit this wild, miraculous, amazing human body?

I watched my little grandson Desmond, who has a sandbox in the yard—a big red plastic sandbox with all his toys, and it has a big red lid. He took the lid off. He's two years old. First he was sifting the sand in his hands, and he just loved feeling the earth and the sand, and that was enough to make him happy. Then he took handfuls of the sand and put it into the lid to make a second sandbox on the grass on the ground next to it. And then he got into it and started to twirl, making a big circle, round and round. He just enjoyed being there in the center of his own body, in his own world, and he laughed. It was so beautiful to see.

One of the great meditation masters in Ajahn Chah's lineage said, "In your search for enlightenment, do not desert the body." And so we can begin to trust. As Voltaire said, the art of medicine primarily consists of amusing the patient while nature does the healing. Just as you could feel how you trust the breath to come in and out, each breath after another—even if you're sick or you go to the hospital, you have to have your bone set or you have surgery—what does the healing? The bones knit, the wound begins to heal. We keep it clean, we keep the infection away. The body knows how to heal itself. We can trust this.

Even the neuroscientists show how with meditation, the traumas and the things that have divided our nervous system, with practice, begin to knit back together again. The things that have separated—we can become more whole. We can come back to ourselves.

So close your eyes for a moment to reflect. As we did in the meditation to begin with, really be in tune with this marvelous body, to come back from any exile. What does this body want and ask? You can know. What wants to be listened to, honored, felt?

Let your eyes open again.

Just as you can trust the breath, just as you can trust the body to heal itself and to speak to you when you ask and listen, so too you can trust the heart. We get exiled from our heart as well. Ajahn Chah said, "If you haven't wept deeply, you haven't really begun to meditate." It's going to be one part of your practice—the tears, the ocean of tears. As we get quiet, there's grief and longing and rage and love and joy and fear, all these things held in the heart.

When we're exiled from the heart... Vivek Murthy, who is the Surgeon General under President Obama and now again under President Biden, said that the majority of what comes through the doors in the hospitals and clinics in the US has its origin in our emotions and our lack of awareness of them. I hope that rings true for you. You can understand it—the level of stress, the level of pain, the lack of awareness, the inability to grieve, to love, to long, to touch, to be in the heart—then manifesting in all these physical ways.

But the poet Ghalib says, "When after heavy rain the storm clouds disperse, is it not clear that they have wept themselves to the end?" And one of the most beautiful things we learn from mindful loving awareness is that we can be aware of all of our emotions—the grief and the love, the longing and the pain, the fear and the joy and the excitement. Mindful loving awareness makes the space for all of these to be held in the great heart of compassion.

Again, take a moment. Close your eyes and reflect. What emotions and feelings are in exile? What's asking to be felt? You can know. The heart will speak.

And then there's the mind—the mind of stories and thoughts and images. That thinking mind, which is a good servant but a poor master. Do we believe all those stories? I hope not.

I remember going to see Ram Dass in the last few years. I went to see him after a period that had been a really busy time, and he asked, "So how are you?" I said, "Too busy."

And he looked at me with a smile and said, "Drop the 'too.'"

It was a beautiful moment, because the "too" was saying it wasn't the way it should be—the judgment, the judging mind. Instead, I could simply say, "Oh, how am I? I'm busy," or "I'm tired."

One of the beautiful things about mindful loving awareness, about ending exile with our bodies and our hearts, is that we can see what's in our mind. "Oh, that's the judging mind. That's the body of fear mind." Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay for now. It's all right. Thank you for your opinion. We don't have to believe all of those thoughts.

And we begin to trust that under all the stories and ideas and fixed opinions and views, under the shame and the longing and the hope, is a deep silence. Like this time of year in the fertile darkness, there is a vast stillness, like the music of the spheres. For what we are is not those thoughts or emotions or this body—we are consciousness itself, timeless and still, the witness to it all.

And here's where we reconnect.

The last of these reconnections, of coming back as Seijo did, is to the body of the earth that is our body. Joanna Macy, together with John Seed, used to hold what were called the Council for All Beings. In these weekend or week-long rituals, participants were invited to go and spend time in the woods, by the streams, in the mountains, and find their connection with something that needed a voice in the human world. Then they came back into council. Each one of them—sometimes because they made it a beautiful ritual—would come back in costume of some kind or create a mask. But really it was the voice of their heart. One at a time they would be invited to speak to the human family: "I speak for the salmon, and our rivers are gone—dammed or polluted." And the voice of the salmon would come through that human. "I speak for the otters. I speak for the glaciers. I speak for the condors, for the ocean."

We have this miraculous capacity to return from disconnection and exile and come back to be truly connected. We know this—it's deep in us. When the hurricane hit Houston and the whole city was flooded some years ago, people were on their roofs waiting to be rescued with their children and their dogs. The whole Cajun Navy came—people with their airboats from Louisiana and Mississippi, saying, "It's our brothers, our sisters." This is what it means to come back, as Seijo did.

"The mind creates the abyss," says Nisargadatta, "and the heart crosses it."

Or the great mystic poet Kabir says, "Are you looking for me? I'm in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours."

You see, the deep lesson from Seijo is that you've never really been separated, that the separation is only a dream. The salmon and the glaciers and the otters and all that you care about, the fields of alfalfa and the kelp in the ocean—they're all in your blood and breath. They are you too. And the separation is only a dream.

So we light our candles for love, and the gift of our meditation practice is to take time to quiet the mind and bring a sacred presence. Even if it's boring—Gandhi called it "blessed monotony"—do it anyway. Because the goal is not to be somewhere else, but to open the eyes of the eyes and the ears of the ears.

This is going to be a tough winter. More people will die. Children will be hungry. Especially vulnerable communities—people of color, communities that have already been marginalized—will be lost. Species will be lost. There will be personal and collective suffering. It's true, and your heart needs to allow this to be felt and touched.

But in this darkest time, it's also true that this is only a chapter in the vast music of the spheres, that the sun returns. And like Seijo, we humans can also return. As we get quiet and listen to the fertile darkness, this return is only limited by our own heart. Meditation is the sweet oil that eases the hinge into the garden.

When we listen and reconnect, we tend our family. Trust that when you listen, you will know how. We can listen to the unheard voices.

We can touch and mend what's been broken. And with our hearts, we can bring peace to our lives, and care and peace across the world.

The practices that we do together—loving-kindness, compassion, deep listening and attention—they bring us back from exile to mystery and presence, to awe, and most importantly, to love.

So I thank you for listening.

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