

How To Move Through Difficulties As A Transformative Initiation (A transcribed mindfulness talk spoken at Spirit Rock by Jack Kornfield)

*To donate to Jack directly, please visit JackKornfield.com/Dana

“When I come back to teach on Monday night, I try to reflect on what might be useful to us all together in the times that we live and sometimes focus very much on the practices of meditation and how to work with them sometimes on the heart trainings of compassion and forgiveness. Tonight, it's a different approach to understanding, but I think in it you might find some things that are valuable. So, let yourself listen - not in order to particularly remember, there's no quiz at the end. Just relax and let it be a meditation and see if something resonates for you that's true that reminds you of something you already know that's a value and if it's not just let it go.

So, we were just sitting for half an hour or so practicing mindfulness, which I also like to translate as loving awareness. The quality of presence that combines knowing what's present with an open heart to receive with love or compassion, this human life this human experience. And in that way, this form of meditation, because there's lots of good forms of meditation, but this form of meditation that's mindfulness is not oriented toward achieving a particular state or experience but rather an invitation for a shift of perspective, to quiet ourselves, quiet the mind a little bit and listen and to remember what matters to us or to remember who we really are.

The Christian mystic Simone Weil says, "The danger is not that the soul should doubt whether there is any bread but that, by a lie, it should persuade itself it is not hungry."

And she's really speaking to the way that we can lose ourselves in the busyness and complexity and demands and difficulties of life and somehow not have the time to stop and listen to what matters most deeply to us.

And it becomes especially important because we're in a time, at least as I've been teaching in this last year or more, of a tremendous amount of cultural anxiety. I could ask how many people in this room have experienced anxiety in this last but don't bother raising your hand. And increase in addictions of all kinds, certainly the opioid crisis but whether it's the addiction to the Internet or shopping or keeping ourselves busy are all consuming or all those things are news, not to speak of continuing war and racism and the environmental issues and destruction that are happening, all of those things and it's so important in some way to have a bigger picture because otherwise what we forget and we lose touch with the possibilities of the heart and the possibilities of living from a place of greater wisdom in the midst of these challenges.

We live in this human body, you get a human incarnation, and the best description of it is “mystery”.

How did you get in there? How did you get into that body with little patches of fur in certain places or you lose the fur. But anyway, and it grows in other places and that's what my friend Wes Niska who teaches here says, "Yeah the hard parts become soft and the soft parts become hard as you age." But it's weird, you know. I've talked about there's a hole at one end of the body in which you stuff dead plants and animals and glug them down through the tube and these weird eyeballs and ears that stick out, mine quite a bit, you know. You ambulate by falling one direction and catching yourself in the other way. I mean, how did you get in there, you know? And what are we going to do with this human life? So, it's mysterious.

And then the Buddhist texts begin, some of them with the phrase, "Oh, nobly born. Oh, you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones of the Buddhas of the awakened ones, remember who

you really are."

This poem from Juan Ramon Jimenez called, "Yo No Soy Yo." "I am not I. I am not I. I am 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." And he is really talking to us about some reality that's not just the small sense of self or kind of limited identity but that we are actually beings of spirit that when you were conceived or when you were born, there is a spirit that comes into this body that you get and when you die. If you've had that privilege of sitting with someone as they die.

It's kind of a remarkable thing. Essentially, it's a conscious death. There's that moment when they're alive and they're there and then you can see or feel their consciousness spirit leaves the body and then it's just you know stuff it's not them anymore. It's wild. And of course, the really wild thing is it's going to happen to you. Ooh. Uh oh, you know.

So, when we sit, we take our seat in the middle of this human mystery of our life and we learn somehow with loving awareness and mindfulness to step out of the plot, the small sense of self so we can bow with what arises to our feelings and thoughts and sensations and stories and you can name them and they all come and we become the loving awareness.

And so, the heart grows in a kind of spaciousness or courage or compassion. But it's not all that easy. Oh, come and sit and breathe in and out and everything, inviting ease and calm because as you get quieter, you get the unfinished business of the heart; the tears you haven't wept, the longing you carry, the fears or anxiety or restlessness that's in there or the doubts about yourself or others.

You also get waves of joy and delight. Some people are so loyal to their suffering they don't know what to do with all that good stuff when it comes. It's unfamiliar to them and you discover, as Whitman says, "I am large. I contain multitudes," and little by little there comes a kind of trust that you can be with all the waves of experience that are your humanity and rest in the center of them with loving awareness or rest and a kind of openness, the trust grows.

But when it gets really bad, I know this from leading many retreats here and people will be sitting and walking on retreat as they do here, we have wee long and month long, two month retreats of silent practice, and then they get really restless or really bored or really frightened or whatever and the first instruction is to name it gently and make space for it and bring compassion to whatever difficult experience.

And then when it gets really really bad, the instruction is, all right, you're so restless. Let yourself be the first person to die of restlessness at Spirit Rock in 2018. Just say, "Okay, take me I can't stand it." And what happens when you're so bored or so restless or so frightened or whatever that state is that's difficult when you say, "All right take me," is that it gets easier because most of the difficulty is actually your resistance to the experience. And when you say, "All right, I'll die of restlessness. Restless, restless, dying, dying." OK. And then of course you think I wonder what they're going to have for dinner, you know? Because the mind has no pride, right?

But you begin to realize that you have the capacity, because who you are is awareness, you have the capacity you have within you, the great heart of compassion and awareness itself, to be present for this human life which it is means to be awake and to do so in a way that's liberating.

Now sometimes this happens in small ways, little by little we learn how to tolerate and be with things that are difficult moment to moment. And sometimes it comes through what I'm going to talk

about more night which is initiation and using the language of initiation is a way of honoring and reframing the difficulties that you go through. How many of you have gone through a lot of difficulties? Don't raise your hands, alright. But it's honoring the importance of the difficulties that we go through.

So, initiation. You all know or probably have heard historically and culturally and so forth that traditional cultures particularly value and celebrate the power of initiation so that, for example if you you're a young man among the Maasai people in East Africa, to prove your manhood you will go out with a spear or whatever and you know, kill a lion. Now there aren't so many lions left unfortunately but it's a way of facing some great danger and showing that you're ready to be included in the community not as a child anymore but as a man.

And there are initiations for women - not just having children. I have a friend who lived with, for a long time, with a group of people way up in the Guatemalan Mayan community. And over several years a woman went through their very deep initiation which required all kinds of difficult things to become seen as a woman in that community.

And I know when I was a monk in Thailand and Burma and so forth, it used to be that every young person in Thailand either as a teenager or when they turned 19 or 20, would shave their heads as a young man or often as a young woman as a nun and go and spend a year in the temple and you were considered not ripe. You were like a green piece of fruit until you had done that and that year in the temple, yes you would learn to make prayers and sit in meditation but you would also go out with your bowl and you would eat once a day whatever food was given to you and you'd have to learn to trust the world that you'd have enough to eat.

And you'd have to sit up all night on new moon and full moon and quarter moon days and not move and sit on the stone floor and just learn how to be with the pain and pleasure and fear and so forth and somehow going through those difficulties it was said, that's what ripens the spirit of these young people so that then they're ready to go out and participate in the society as an initiated person. Of course, I'm sorry to tell you that what initiation most prepares you for is further initiation but that's a whole other story.

Initiation in another language means that you have to go through a narrow place that's so difficult to get through you can't take your baggage with you. It sort of strips you down in some difficult way.

And this from the Zen teacher Karlfried Durckheim, he says, "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 them refuge and comfort and encourage the 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 true spirit of awakening." .

So, this is initiation and sometimes it's a calling that you feel, a spiritual calling or a longing, you have to do something, you have to show prove yourself, go through something difficult, a vision quest or a retreat or a sabbatical or a time out in nature and often it comes to unbidden. And in these last days I've been visiting some close friends who are in the hospital with some major difficulties, strokes and other kinds of things, it also can come collectively as our cultural anxiety moment that we're in.

And in Greek it's called a **katobas** - which means a below, a crisis that comes. You're going along tootling along with your life and then all of a sudden something happens and your life changes. And

it will happen, just in case you hadn't noticed. It does happen to us as people. And it requires you to step out of the ordinary way that you're moving along in your life and learn something new through that crisis or difficulty individually or perhaps now for us collectively as a culture. In some way we're in the process of some deep cultural initiation - just as an individual might.

And so now I want to shift the language and talk in a more mythological or archetypal way. Because one of the things that seems to have happened in recent years culturally is that the furies have been released. And in ancient Greece the Furies, they have various names to them, but there are Furies, a vengeance and hatred and so forth, they appear when truth is not being honored, when oaths are not being kept, when the kind of honorable respect that people have pledged their life to or devoted themselves to in some collective way or individual way has been undermined and betrayed.

And the thing about when the Furies are released is that, in the Greek mythology anyway, nothing can stop them which is not very good news. I mean, that's how powerful they are, and we can see it in a certain way collectively. But then there was, as you read in the Greek myths, there was finally a resolution to the Furies that came from the political and societal betrayals in ancient Greece and so forth, and that is when the goddess Athena invited them into her temple, the goddess of wisdom, and made a place for them in the temple of wisdom and said you too have a place here and made an altar and an honor and said even the Furies that arise in us out of deep betrayal and so forth a vengeance and all those, if they can be held in the temple of wisdom then we can all come together again.

So, I leave that for you to reflect on what that could mean for us and maybe a little bit of this will get clearer as I speak.

So, the story, the mythological story, now that I want to build on following this thread is an ancient story from the Katha Upanishads called, "The story of a young man named Nachiketa". And Nachiketa came from a wealthy family in ancient India. He was part of the top 1%. He was the privileged, alright. And while he grew up and he could enjoy being a person with a great deal of privilege he was also a young man and as a teenager and as he grew older he also saw the poverty around him, that it wasn't just that everything was fine but that whereas in fact a tremendous amount of injustice and hypocrisy and racism as there was, there was the caste system and all kinds of things where people not only lived well as he did but people who lived well also in many cases live well off of the work and the exploitation of others and young people look around and they say wait a second what kind of world is this.

So, he saw both the injustice and the hypocrisy. And his father who had become an old man, was an older father, started to get ill and he became really worried and frightened about death and in particular what would happen to his mortal soul. And of course, in India at that time in the Upanishads the teachings were that of rebirth and what your next birth will be, and he became really worried partly because perhaps he reflected on the way he had lived and so forth. And so he talked to some of his wealthy friends and colleagues who steered him to the Brahmin priests who ran the big temple in the community there and other leaders and they suggested that if he made a magnificent offering divesting himself of much of what he owned and offering it to the temple and the priests, a huge donation, that that would give him a very fine rebirth.

It's been tried in many continents in many different traditions. Some would call it indulgences or whatever. But anyway, he was terrified, and the priests said this will do it. And so, he created a public event, a huge parade. He wanted a parade. We won't talk about that and at the culmination of it he came to the gates of the temple and he said I give my cattle. There was this whole cattle and oxen and all my gold and all I value to the priests of this temple, in public in a great big display.

And his son was standing there only son. And it struck him as a little bit of hypocritical and a bit of a sham. It didn't have that feeling of genuine spirituality. And he said again, "I give all I value to the temple." And the son said, "What about me, your son? Don't you value me.?" And he said it in a way that was really an affront to his father in the middle of the public square in this great celebration. And his father was overcome with anger at being shamed by his son, he said, "You? I give you to death." That was his response. An angry father. He was mortified. I give you to death.

But you know how young people are. This is from Faulkner who wrote, "Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor. Not for kudos, not for cash, not for your picture in the paper, an inheritance or money in the bank, just refuse to bear them." And this young man said, "I'm not going to bear it. I will not go along with this sham."

"I give you to death." said his father and the young man said, "I accept," and walked away, as the story is told. So, then Nachiketa, the young man, decided to seek Lord Yama. Lord Yama is the Lord of Death who presides over the underworld and he went deep into the forest, Nachiketa, and he took a seat and he said, "I will not get up until I see death." And he waited and waited for many days without moving. He sat through pain and hunger and difficulty.

This from the poet Kabir who wrote, "I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days." And you find it in meditation. Some of the temples that I trained in not only would we sit and walk but they said when you want to master posture then sit for 24 hours and don't move or stand as I did and don't move until you feel the pain, the fire, the doubt, the fear, all of that until you can just remain steady no matter what happens.

So, here's Nachiketa sitting through pain and hunger and fear out in the forest for three days and nights without moving and all of a sudden...Well, he knew somehow that he had to face death. He knew that. "All over the place from popular culture to the propaganda system there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume."

And there's some way he said, "I'm just gonna opt out of this system. I am not going to do it." And he knew somehow that something had to die to do this. You know, the way he'd been with his father, who he was in the community, that he knew there was something bigger than the identity that'd been given to him. I've also learned as a psychologist and a teacher over the years, something very interesting, when people are considering suicide or suicidal very often, they're right about wanting to die but there's one little basic confusion they make. They think it's their body that has to die when in fact something does have to die. And it might be the role they've taken or the job they have or the identity they have or the fact that they haven't come out of whatever closet they're hiding in or whatever is true to them. They've been superficial. It might be the marriage that they're in that doesn't work that has die.

Something has to go but they think it's their body when actually it's the death of something that will allow them to become bigger. Does this make sense to you? And that's really important to honor. So, it's not about the body and Nachiketa understood this. And somehow there comes in us through our practice, our meditation or initiations a kind of trust that if we can face death in some fashion or other that it will actually be of benefit.

This is Carl Sagan, the great scientist cosmologist, after surviving a near fatal illness he says, "I recommend almost dying to everyone. It's character building. You get a much clearer perspective of what's important and what isn't. The preciousness and beauty of life." So, we sense that in some way.

And I remember my friend Michelle McDonald, who's a colleague and teacher, she was also a preschool teacher and she was teaching these little kids, five-year olds, and she said, "Let's study death," and little kids know about death and they were interested in their own way. "Go out in the forest and collect dead things."

So, they came back from the trees and they had dead leaves and dead sticks, and somebody found a little like part of a skeleton of a mouse or a lizard and they made a whole pile of dead things and then they began to talk about what is death. Why did things die? Is death OK? And then she said, "Well, what would happen if there wasn't death? And one of the little kids said, "Well, then there'd be more and more trees and more and more things and there'd be no room for us, for all the new ones coming in."

Without death the thing would get very crowded. And we start to trust, if we look deeply that we're part of some cycle and that in some way every day...What did Dylan say, "He who's not being busy born is busy dying or she who is not busy being born is busy dying." We're always dying and being reborn in new ways and that we can begin to trust this.

Now there's a new book by Michael Pollan who wrote, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and all kinds of other bestsellers entitled, "How to change your mind on Psychedelics, Depression, Addiction, Dying and Consciousness. And it's a pretty wonderful book in which he details of the new research on psilocybin and psychedelics that are being done at Johns Hopkins Medical School and NYU and at UCLA and places like that.

And it turns out that as he describes it...Well, here's how I heard it. Actually I did talk to Michael quite a bit for some hours during the course of his research for the book but then I was in Hawaii when one of the key researchers at Johns Hopkins, one of the central figures in this book who's famous or respected psychopharmacologist, a professor at the medical school Roland Griffith was first time visiting Ram Dass and describing the research that he'd done with cancer patients and people dying and with people who are addicted to various things. And the main thing that he communicated to Ram Dass who loved it and he said that if people take this substance with blindfolds and music and really go in and experience somehow a very deep shift in consciousness, he said often they're released from their addictions or they're released from their fears of dying.

And the one scale that we have that's the most accurate in measuring what will be effective from this is the scale that we use called the Human Mystical Experience. And if people have a mystical experience then they change in really deep and radical ways. And it happened from the work they're doing with the psilocybin that that was the case in 80% of the people.

I mean it can also happen through unceasing prayer going on a retreat or going in the high mountains or making love all kinds of other times that we can have that or see it in childbirth or sitting with someone who's dying. There are all kinds of ways to be close to the mystery but through this research work, if people have had mystical experience and I'll leave that for you to define to yourself really stepping out of their normal small sense of self then addictions drop away difficulties, depression changes. Interesting isn't it. You can you can if you're interested read Michael Pollan's book.

So, here we have to get back to Nachiketa. Nachiketa's sitting there in the forest not moving for three days and nights, his initiation, waiting for death, and all of a sudden he finds himself in the kingdom of death and he said, "Where is Lord Yama. I have come to see him." And they said, "Lord Yama is out collecting rent. The only ones of us who are here are war pestilence and famine. Can we help you?" And Nachiketa said, "Nope. I will wait further." And he waited and finally Lord Yama arrived back and his assistants, war pestilence and famine, said, "We have a very unusual

young man here. Normally people run the other way when they hear you're coming, Lord Yama, but he sat for three days and nights and he said I won't move until I get an audience with the Lord of Death."

So Lord Yama sat down with him and gazed at him and said, "You are indeed an unusual young man. What brings you?" And Nachiketa told his story and says, 'I will not live with hypocrisy and injustice. I cannot do that. And my father said I give you to death and I said then I will go.'"

And listening to this young man, Lord Yama felt this is indeed a courageous young man. He's someone with a great spiritual heart. And he said, "Because I have kept you waiting for three days," he said, "I will give you three boons." That is three wishes. You know, we're in the mythological territory, you know how these stories go. You get three wishes, right?

"I will give you three boons and you can ask for that which you wish." So, Nachiketa sat quietly and he tried to feel inside, what is it that one needs in this kind of journey to really transform and free oneself.

And the first boon he asked for was the boon of forgiveness. He said, "May I be forgiven. May my father see me with the eyes that he had when I was first born as his son. May all that I have done that's caused pain to others be forgiven. May I forgive myself."

And everyone in this room has been disappointed. Everyone in this room has been betrayed and hurt. It's part of the human dance. Anybody not, you can have your money back. It's just not how it happens, right? And not only that, everybody in the room has hurt somebody else and betrayed someone else or abandoned them or disappointed them.

Forgiveness that Nachiketa asked for is that releases the chains of the heart. Because without it we are chained to the past. Whether you have the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda or the Northern Irish Catholic and Protestants or the Palestinians and the Israelis or the Bosnian and the Serbs and the Croats and they all say, "Well, your people did it to my people last year or 100 years ago, 500 years ago, we're never going to forget" They are chained to the past and they're not free and Nachiketa understood this and he said, "May I be granted forgiveness." The first of the boons.

A story to read to you. Where are we with time? I think we're doing OK. So, this is a story and it has a little coda to it because some of you may have heard it and I've given it to people and it got read to The United Nations and things.

Among the Babemba people of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly he is placed in the center of the village alone and unfettered and all work ceases and every man woman and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual and then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused one at a time each recalling the good things that person in the center has done in their lifetime. Every incident every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy is recounted. All their positive attributes, good deeds, strengths and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This communal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end the circle is broken. A joyous celebration takes place and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the community.

I read about this and I think about our prison system and the millions of people who are both incarcerated or part of the parole and this system, millions and millions, and think what would it be if we had a society that could see the goodness in someone rather than the incarceration and punishment. Our prisons also have become the default mental hospitals. I mean what kind of society?

In Hawaii on the coast of the big island on the Kona Coast South, there is a temple called Pu'uuhonua o Honaunau which is called this temple of refuge and in the Hawaiian culture no matter what you'd done, if you'd broken the worst taboo or kapu, whatever it was, if you could get yourself into that temple you would be forgiven. It's right on the ocean. It's kind of a wild place and I went in there I thought, "OK I hope this place works. I'm here."

But think about if we could do this in our culture. So, Nachiketa asked for this but I told you there was a coda to this story. So, I read it at one point and a good friend of mine who grew up in Zimbabwe and speaks Shona and speaks some of the Babemba tongue and so forth. He said, "You know, I've lived with Babemba. I've never seen this." He said, "I think this is an artifact of the Internet. Someone created this, you know?" He said, "But I have a couple of really good friends who are Babemba elders and Shamans, good buddies of mine, so I'm going to send it to them and if they don't do it then maybe they can try it out and I'll let you know how it goes."

So, this is how it all works in the world these days. So, this is Nachiketa's first boon. Now, second boon. He asks for courage. Remember, this is a young man, or it could be a young woman, he says, "Might I be granted that inner fire or the courage to live my life fully, to truly be alive." Because when we are, all kinds of things are possible, we don't even know what's possible.

Thomas Jefferson said, "One person with courage is a majority." And I had on my refrigerator for a long time a picture of that Chinese man with a shopping bag standing in front of a line of tanks near Tiananmen Square. One person with courage is a majority.

And so when you sit or when you do your spiritual practice it's not so much to get some experience but to awaken your capacity to be truly alive and present. I think of my teacher Dipa Ma. One of the greatest. She was one of our kind of greatest masters in the last number of generations and she began her meditation practice after a series of tragedies in which two of her three children died and then her husband died. She had one child left and she became paralyzed and lay in bed for about a year and could not move from depression and illness. And then she more or less crawled up the stairs of the temple and said, "I need to find something and this is my last gasp. I will do whatever you tell me." And she became this kind of extraordinary teacher and meditator partly because what was left in her.

Yes, there was desperation, if you will, but also there was a kind of courage. She said, "I have to do this. I have to find some way to deal with the suffering of this human life. And I know that there's something more."

And in recent traveling, Trudy, my beloved wife and teaching partner, and I were teaching in Europe. We were teaching in France and we were also in England. We did some teaching for the Oxford Mindfulness Centre and then we got to go teach in Parliament which was very cool. And we got taken around Parliament and it turns out that there is a Parliament Mindfulness Group. Eighty-five members of Parliament and this is one of their many reports, it's called "Mindful UK". That's right. And they have built in now into the UK national healthcare system and into the education system, they are passing laws that require teaching of mindfulness and social and emotional skills and compassion in healthcare and in education.

So, we got taken around and first, here's the House of Commons and there was the home minister and they were grilling him just like you see in those B.B.C. things or whatever, and it was fun to watch all the rough and tumble a little bit and the questions and then we went to the House of Lords and there were even a few people with those curly wigs. And it was a little more civil discourse but nevertheless a lot of concern about things.

Then we met with them. It was 20 or so of them and first we sat in meditation together and I guided some practices and so forth and then they talked, and they said, "You know, we see it every week and this is one of the best things that happens to us all week. We sit together, we quiet ourselves..." And there were people from two sides of the aisle, they said, "We meditate, we quiet ourselves and then we can really listen to each other in a way that we don't down there at all. We love it."

And they asked me to talk. And we'd been shown around Parliament and the history there is crazy and here is where the Magna Carta came in and here is where poor Thomas Moore lost his head or whatever. Here's Winston Churchill's bus and so forth and now they're facing Brexit and it's a great dilemma and we talked about courage and what it meant that the whole in a certain way, the best of that history was the history of courage. And what did it mean to carry courage in in a difficult time.

And it was a beautiful conversation. And what was clear in it, is that it's never too late to start, wherever you are even if things are very difficult. When you center and quiet yourself and you really look in your heart what matters, you can direct yourself in a way no matter how it turns out that you don't have regrets, that you really live the life that matters to you. And so that's what was there, and it was quite wonderful.

So, this is what Nachiketa asked for. He asked for courage, to live fully, be present. And now getting near the end here, Lord Yama says, "Well, you've had your two boons, there is a third one for you. What would you ask? Nachiketa sat for a little while. And he said, "I ask for that which is immortal. Which is undying."

And Lord Yama sat back, and he said, "Really? I mean, you could ask for anything." He said, "For example, you could have and by the magic of his own powers you could have a palace." And he showed him a palace. "You could have a royal chariot golden with all these steeds. You could have women and consorts and you could have..." And he just showed him the Ferrari basically and all the possibilities. He said, "You could have anything. Think it over. This is your last wish. What would be great for you?"

And Nachiketa being a very wise young man considered and look back at the Lord of Death and said, "Tell me, Yama. Will not all these things you've shown me soon enough return to your kingdom?" And Yama said, "Well yeah, you have a point there. Yes. In fact, they are all temporal." And Nachiketa said, "Then for my third boon, I request to come to know that which is beyond death." And Lord Yama said, "Then I have a gift for you." And he went, and he returned with a gift and he placed into Nachiketa's hand a beautiful slightly ornate beautiful mirror. And he said, "You must look into this mirror and ask one question. Who am I?"

Who am I. And this is the great spiritual question many masters, grand masters... I remember we had at the end of one of our three month retreats on the East Coast in our center there, we have a two month winter retreat here. We would invite different teachers to come in to sit with people after they'd been silent for three months meditating or silent with some teachings and so forth.

Very open and this great Korean Zen master Kusan from Nine Mountains Monastery came in and we told him they'd been practicing hard and training themselves and so forth, described it and he got down he said, "Ah, your practice no good." Not really you know three months. They didn't feel very good about that. But anyway, he said, "Oh mindfulness, nah." He said only one thing and he took out his Zen stick and he banged it on the floor and he said, "What is this.? What is this?" And he kept shouting. "What is this, this life. This body. What am I? What is this? This question you must answer." It was a beautiful Zen moment. Left them all kind of shaking like that.

But this is the question. Really, who are you? And there's an interesting way to understand this. When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged alright. Starts to wrinkle and sag and lose its fur and you know puff out in certain ways and get skinnier and it does all the weird things that bodies do, right? It ages. But the thing that's odd is that you don't necessarily feel older. You know that experience? Almost everybody has. And that's because in that moment you can see your body like at a little distance and the body ages, it's in time.

It's a little infant and a little child and teenager and a young adult. And then it gets older and so forth eventually dies. But the consciousness that's observing the body is outside of time. It's looking and saying, "Hmm. Lost its fur. Seventy-three years old, getting older." This and that. You see it from the perspective of consciousness itself which is timeless and go, how's this incarnation going for you?

Basically, you're able to step back in that moment. If you take a pause with it and realize that there's a difference between the normal identity of who you take yourself to be and that mysterious thing that doesn't feel older cause it's not. Because conscious awareness doesn't age. You are spirit or consciousness that was born into this body and that will leave it. You are not whatever it is, Big Macs and Kale or whatever it is you eat, it's just not who you are. And you're not your emotions even though they're very dramatic and we appreciate them, but they pass. And Lord help us, you're not your thoughts.

So, what are you? You are loving awareness itself. You are consciousness and what Nachiketa learned by looking in the mirror that was given to him by Lord Yama is that he realized that who he was was undying spirit. That that's the reality. That's who you are as well, and you'll see when you die you float out of your body and there's light and you go wow. Wasn't that an incarnation. Wonder what's next. You wait. You don't have to believe it. Check it out later, see what happens.

But what happens when you allow yourself to see your life as a series of initiations, large and small, is more and more you trust rebirth itself like the great chemist, Lavoisier, who said, "Everything changes, and nothing is lost. When you do chemistry and you do the equations, the molecules on one side. All those things go into a new compound, but it's not lost."

And it's a spiritual truth as well. You begin to trust rebirth both personally that you go through hard things, you lose things that you love, people that you care about, the way things were, and it seems like it's the end of this story. It's not the end of the story. It is part of this cycle of birth and death that happens all the time and that every day...You're born every morning new at breakfast. You might as well admit it. Alright, what are you going to do with this day. And it's both personal but it's also collective. That even now in times of cultural anxiety and some very very painful things that are happening especially to the large numbers of the most vulnerable in the community and in the world and so forth and things that we want to do about it and need to respond, that it's also possible that something some other energy, it's not possible, it's inevitable that also something new will be born.

And we don't know what it is. Our job is to tend and plant the seeds and bring our trust and allow something new to happen. But for Nachiketa this is Thich Nhat Hanh writing, he says, "This body is not me. I'm not limited by this body. I am life without boundaries. I've never been born and never died. Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars, manifestations from the wondrous true mind from consciousness itself. Since before time I have been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide and seek. So, laugh with me, hold my hand. Let us say goodbye to meet again. Tomorrow we meet at the source of every moment, we meet in all forms of life for this is what we are."

Now, it's poetry but it's also possibly true. "Who are you?" said Lord Yama. "Look in the mirror and see." And my teacher Nisargadatta, the great Indian Sage said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing. Love sees that I am everything. Between these two my life flows." And this is what Nachiketa understood. He said, "I'm nothing. You die in some ways. The old. Something new is reborn. I'm nothing and I am everything."

And his heart became free. Free to love. Free with forgiveness. Free with courage. Free to remember that he was spirit and not limited by his body or his history. Those things all affect us but they're not the end of the story any more than Nelson Mandela walking out of 27 years in Robben Island prison with so much magnanimity and graciousness and forgiveness and compassion. They can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit. They can your body in the hospital. No one can imprison your spirit.

So Nachiketa found this freedom and this trust that he could let go and die and be reborn as we do. That things will renew themselves. And then he realized that he was already home. That what he sought he had found, but then the question is, how does he get back? How does he get back from the underworld and you think about the myth of Persephone coming from the underworld to bring Spring again after the Winter darkness.

And what happened as he stood there is Nachiketa realized that wherever you love is the sacred ground, is the holy ground, is the promised land and his heart had opened. Wisdom says I am nothing and love say I am everything. He was filled with love for his family, his community, for all that was alive. He knew that was himself and he opened his eyes again. And there he was back in the forest grove ready to walk into town.

And they show this picture in the Zen teachings of going into the forest to tame the wild ox and the last of the ten pictures of the ox herding is this old man entering the town with his wine bottle and a staff. He said, "I enter the market place and all who I look upon I offer blessings and they all become awakened." Something like that. And even as a young man Nachiketa returned. But he returned in a very different way because he had faced his own death, his own fears, he'd learned forgiveness. He learned a kind of courage that couldn't be taken from him. And then the world became beautiful.

This is Mary Oliver, kind of our modern great poet. Our modern Rumi. "What can I say that I've not said before, so I'll say it again. The leaf has a song in it. Stone is the face of patience. Inside the river there's an unfinished story and you are somewhere in it and it will never end until it all ends. Take your busy heart to the Art Museum and the Chamber of Commerce. But take it also to the forest. The song you heard singing in the leaf when you were a child is singing still. I am of years lived so far 74 and the leaf is singing still."

And somehow Nachiketa having descended to the land of the death was reborn to the land of the Lord Yama. And everything he looked upon somehow and the shining blessing of an open heart and a kind of deep courage. And we see it.

I guess the last thing I'll say, when people go on retreat a week or ten days or a month or two hear, they usually come in pretty tired, sometimes haggard and they worked really hard to get the time off so by the time they get here they're especially tired and they settle down in the first few days. It takes a little while for their body to quiet and their mind to begin to settle. But when you see them at the end of ten days or however that retreat, they look a lot younger. We call it the Vipassana facelift. Right? Their eyes are shining, their skin looks... And they walk more slowly there's a flower...And I remember this guy, this big tattooed ex-Marine and he's looking, cupping the flowers in his hands and smelling them like this. And it works.

The initiation of being with yourself works. Going off on retreat or into the mountains or a place to really let yourself tend your heart. And then you come back renewed. And that's the blessing. And then to have a practice that you can remind yourself in this way even as you said in the morning or the evening or walk, all of that is an invitation to live in a different way.

So, let's sit for a moment.

Forgiveness, courage and the mystery that you are.

Loving awareness itself born into this body.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed please visit dharmaSeed.org/donate.”



MindfulnessExercises.com