

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Wheel of Life: An Interview with Mark Nepo

July 2020



Mark Matousek (MM): Hello, Mark, it's really good to see you again.

Mark Nepo (MN): It's wonderful to be with you as always. I feel like it's one deep conversation we just keep going further in together. [laughs]

MM: I feel the same way. I feel the same. We were just talking about what's going on in the world, and you were saying that you're troubled by some people who don't seem to be paying attention or blowing off what's going on.

MN: I feel like as we get further into this, it almost feels like- you remember, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's passages of grief and stages. It feels to me like there are pockets of all of us that are acting that out. There are some people who are acting out in anger, there are some people acting out in denial, there's some people bartering, and grief, and hopefully we get to acceptance. I find, emotionally, it's very challenging to go out into the world, and having people not honor what's going on, because I think one of the things that is so powerful at this time is that we are being forced and challenged to inhabit the ancient truth that all the traditions speak about, that we are each other and when we take care of one we take care of all.

I think of the Hindu ethic, "Thou art that." Every tradition has a different version of this. I was surprised – I shouldn't have been – but I was surprised that so much of what we're encountering globally, emotionally, echoes a lot of what I experienced individually years ago with my cancer journey.

MM: Could you say more?

MN: On one hand, I remember, and this is over thirty years ago, but when I walked out of the doctor's office and was diagnosed with cancer, the door I had come in through was gone.

The life that I walked through, I couldn't return to it. It wasn't there. I feel that's happened to us as humanity. Where we were two months ago, three months ago, that world is gone. Understandable as it is that we flail and we argue and we resist, we're in the new world. The question is, just like cancer, for me, was a catalyst. There's nothing holy about cancer, but always what is opened is more important than what opens us.

The question here is, "What is this opening all of us to?" I'm reminded of, which I talked about in one of my other books, but that the original definition of sacrificing, there's so much heartfelt heroic sacrifice going on in so many places and levels; and those acts come out of a soil of sacrifice, if you will, where that original definition – sacrifice means to give up what no longer works, in order to stay close to what is sacred. Again, back when I was turned inside out and upside down and almost died, clearly there were things that weren't working that I had to give up to inhabit a full life in the new world. I wonder what is it that no longer works that we are being asked to give up now. What is broken that needs to be left dismantled, and what is broken that needs to be repaired? I don't have the answers to those questions, but I think we're being thrust into those questions.

MM: No question. Individually and communally.

MN: Yes. I've been going through my own – I'm sure you too, those of us – my teaching at this point in my life is my lifeblood to be with people in the circles I've been blessed to be in for years, not knowing when or if we can ever do that again in person. I've been shocked and

grieving and, and then at the same time, accepting and learning how to find a new way through this, what we're doing now through Zoom and other things. It's just a mix, a roller coaster of feelings which I think we're all going through daily.

MM: Absolutely. Let's turn to your wonderful new book.

MN: Oh, thank you.

MM: Yet another beautiful book. I don't know quite how you do it –

MN: [laughs]

MM: – but you somehow managed to. I'd like to focus really today on questions of love in many, many different permutations. Let's just begin with something beautiful that you write in the book. You say, "We need to pry ourselves open and let the tenderness we were born with meet the world. We must risk being tender if we want to truly live." What do you mean by that? Could you say more?

MN: Sure. I think in the way that the sun – which is a great teacher for us because it emanates light and warmth in all directions without preference – I think that our spirit and our heart are like the inner sun. I feel like our job is to never let that light go out. In a paradoxical way, it's through the cracks in our humanity, that that inner light comes out. We're worn by experience over time, over all that is not essential. It's almost as if, experience and suffering and love are to human beings what erosion is to nature, in a way. Somehow we're in this journey of being eroded of all that will wear away, until we reach what won't, until all that's left is what's unbreakable.

I think that the only way – in the Dao, there's one of the chapters we're allowed to – it says, "The brittle and hard break. Only the soft and flexible endure." He says, "Be like water." Our tenderness and our vulnerability are the life force, the adaptive life force, through which we fully live and love and receive each other. I think water is a great metaphor. When you look at water, it's both powerful and gentle. It's clear. It's see-through, and yet reflective. It's also the one thing that – water can give of itself completely and lose none of itself. It will receive whatever you put in it, and not lose who or what it is.

I think when we can love and give, and I think this is important in this time, we're so over-trained in the mind. Certainly problem-solving is a great tool, but it's not a God to be prayed to. Often when I've reached the end of my problem-solving, and I'm exhausted and can't figure something out, I've learned that all I have to do is give, and it changes everything. It almost wipes my mind clean. Rather than staying stuck in my mind, just give. Give completely to whatever is before me. I have new eyes and new ears, and something else has come in that changes, maybe even makes the problem that I thought was a problem no longer a problem.

MM: Exactly. You can see the things that are supposedly negative or destructive or problematic, are actually doorways to a deeper understanding.

MN: Yes.

MM: I love what you say about acknowledging the worst in ourselves, and how important it is to acknowledge the worst in ourselves and our brutality as well as in other people, to

increase love, compassion and the capacity for justice. That really takes in the whole mandala of a human being. Could you say something more about that?

MN: You know that so many people have spoken about Carl Jung, all about the shadow in all of us. Of course, Lincoln talks about that famously, “Our better angels.” If there’s better angels, there’s worse angels and we have to acknowledge, I think, all of it, because when I can acknowledge and honor what I’m capable of, though I don’t want to be, that in a moment of fear, I can be cruel, that in a moment of insecurity and impatience, I can get angry and flare-up. When I own those, then I recognize that you’re capable of it, too, and everyone is, and therefore it opens my heart to more compassion, because – I think this is one – I can’t remember his name now, I can’t remember if it’s in this book or another one.

Maybe five, seven years ago, there was a Polish film director who made a movie about how Hitler became Hitler, about the psychological development of Hitler as a teenager college student, as a failed student. It was called *Max*, I believe the movie was. It was a big controversy at the time. I remember a lot of people saying, “How can you skip all of this to – he doesn’t deserve that kind of attention or compassion or interest.” He said, “That’s not why I did this.”

He said in an interview in *The Times* that when we call out evil, we can call out Hitler or Stalin or Milosevic or any other people, and say they’re monsters. That’s the easy part. But when we trace back, Hitler was a baby. Everyone starts out – and he was suggesting, which makes sense to me – that by a thousand small choices, any one of us could become evil. That’s the power of recognizing not once it’s crossed the line, but before it crosses the line. I guess this goes into what spiritual education is all about.

MM: How does that lead to compassion and justice and connection, as opposed to pessimism, self-defensiveness and a kind of fatalism which a lot of folks are dealing with now? Just feeling like evil and negativity and destruction, cynicism, can be seen as on the rise at the moment as well. What is that tipping point?

MN: Well, for me, and again, of course, we’re just comparing notes, I don’t have any answers. There’s a wonderful quote by Rilke. There were so many, but this one I hadn’t run into. He said, “Let everything happen, beauty and terror. No one feeling is final. Keep going.” I think the first thing that I’m learning, because those of us who are, everyone is, but certainly in our calling, being sensitive and the life of feeling, I’ve learned after all this time while I am so shaped by feeling, I am not my feelings. A great teacher is a tree. The life of the tree is brought into full view because of wind, but the tree is not the wind.

MM: That’s true. I love that. I’ve never thought of that before.

MN: The tree is not the wind, and likewise, we are brought alive by the wind of feeling, but we’re not our feelings. All the meditation traditions invite us to get below the feeling, but as a full humanist, I believe it’s through our feelings that are spiritual. I think that we are challenged constantly. Even now, I think about how months ago under all our drive and running and commerce and conflict and everything all over the world, in the silent fabric under everything, of matter, one little atom shifted in relation to the atoms around it quietly, and the coronavirus was born.

It made me feel that love has to move as quickly as disease, give has to move as quickly as take, care has to move as quickly as cynicism. Of course, we’re human, so I’ve had moments

of grief and even, I wouldn't say strongest despair, but certainly, I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me at times in adjusting to this new world. No one feeling is final, and we are more than one feeling. Throughout history, we've had all these philos – the wheel of life, as you know, it never stops, and it's all of it. We've had whole quadrants of it try to be frozen, and then build world views out of it.

If you're on the top, now it's transcending, it's wonderful, it's Shambhala, it's, "Yeah." If we're frozen on the bottom, it's cynicism, it's nihilism, it's pragmatism, it's fear-driven. Yes, yes and yes, it never stops. It's all of it, and what holds all of it is the unnamable spirit. That we go back to that light coming out of us, that love coming out of us. I think that we're challenged to endure our journey, until love can show itself as the greatest principle.

MM: Beautiful. Part of that journey, as you say in the book, is helping each other to stay awake. That's so important nowadays. How can we do that? What are some ways that we can help one another to stay awake, particularly in this crisis?

MN: I think it goes back to the oldest medicines, holding and listening. We're being forced to stop. It's interesting that we have been forced into a global Sabbath. I think back, Wayne Muller's book on Sabbath many years ago, had a seminal touchstone where he talked about how that in the Jewish tradition, the word Sabbath literally means, "The one day we don't turn one thing into another." You don't bend it, you don't manipulate it, you don't throw it away, you don't build it up, you don't turn it into gold, you don't [chuckles]. It is what it is. Then when we can stop, then it shows its sanctity.

Its sanctity has never stopped emanating, it's who can't perceive it, when we're moving too fast or in vain or in fear, or our eyes are covered over. We've been forced into a global Sabbath. We can help each other stay awake by recovering the fact, first off, that we don't know anything. Like Adam and Eve, we're here and we're starting over. And to honor that, to admit that, and therefore to listen to life, to each other, to mirror each other, and to help each other stay awake by truly listening. One of the things, which goes back to my cancer journey, is back then even, I had good doctors and nurses, and not so good. All of them, at some point, even meaning well, spoke beyond what they knew. I would have whatever the day would bring, whatever the test would bring, what was next, next steps, and then they would venture into what no one knew, which is whether I would live or die.

I find that's what's happening now. The news is really filled with people who are no different than us. Once they've conveyed whatever real information they have, then they're just spinning beyond what they know, except there's a camera on them. A daily practice which I had to develop back then, but I feel like I'm needing to resurrect, is how do I discern what is true?

Then beyond that, we're being asked to become intimate with the unknown, which again all the traditions speak about, but we're being asked in real-time. Just say you don't know and you're afraid. You can do that on camera. That would be more helpful, for us to be in that unknown and fear together, because there's something about our modern mentality, that would feel more comfortable with a dark known, than to actually rest in the unknown, so we have all these doomsday scenarios.

MN: That's very profound. I don't think people recognize how much more comfortable we are with a known darkness, then we are with a possible freeing, healing unknown.

MN: Also I remembered Kierkegaard said wonderfully that, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.” Not anxiety like going to a dentist, but more that disequilibrium of, “I don’t recognize this. My ground is not solid.” Like fledgling birds, when you really think about it, they don’t know that they were born to fly.

[laughter]

MN: Parent birds literally one day push them out of the nest, they go, “Wait a minute.” I imagine that first moment when I think of Kierkegaard’s, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.” They’re like, “Oh oh. Oh oh. What do I –” and they start rapidly, desperately just flapping, not because they think they are flying, because they don’t know what else to do. Then, “Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. That’s why. Oh, okay.” That’s the kind of disequilibrium of new ground, that great love and great suffering usher us into.

MM: Emerson called it, “The terrible freedom.”

MN: That’s wonderful.

MM: Inside we have this thing that’s just, it’s awful and it’s the ultimate opening, and the ultimate impossibility. Yes. Talk a little bit please Mark about the orbit of concern. You mention that in the book. What do you mean by the orbit of concern, and how do we need to be aware of that in these days?

MN: That phrase actually came from a wonderful talk that President Obama – I still call him President Obama.

MM: He will always be president.

MN: He will always be President Obama. He spoke about extending our orbits of concern and compassion. One of the sections in the book, there are – the four sections are “Our walk in the world,” “Our true inheritance,” which we can touch on, and then, “Widening our circle,” which comes from something that Einstein said. Einstein talked about how we have this illusion that what’s familiar is intimate, when actually everything is intimate.

Our challenge is to widen our circle of compassion. The Native Americans speak about it with their worldview, all my relations, you and I aren’t just family. The mountain is family. The river is family. The seven generations are family. The similar thing with the orbits of concern and the widening our compassion, which is really where the book – and I know you know this too, but these books – that’s why I’m able to write so much because I write about what I don’t know, which is a lot, so there’s a never-ending terrain to write about, because that’s how I learn. This is what – actually I feel like I retrieved the books.

One of the lessons in this book from widening and our circle and being who we are and loving and really inhabiting our love is that the walls – I think when we can be who we are everywhere, then the temple is the world, which is the last chapter of the book. Yes, we train, we practice, we learn sanctity and intimacy and reverence in sanghas, in sacred relationships, in mosques and temples and elder councils, whatever you want to name. I think the real goal is for the walls to come down, so we can inhabit – the temple’s the world. It’s not in a church or a sangha. That’s the seed, like the seed becomes the tree, those sanctified spaces. The temple is the world, and that’s what it is about, our orbits of concern have to grow. I think this is great love and great suffering, do this.

I remember years ago – I’m 69 but probably back in my forties or late thirties, I was in a grocery store and there was an elderly woman who clearly had a back problem, was very slow. I felt compassion from a distance, and then it took so long I honestly got impatient. Not the better angel of my nature. Just a moment, nothing happened, but then within four or five years – at that point in my life I was a runner – and something happened and I tweaked my muscle and my back. That happens like, “Oh my God.” All of a sudden you can’t do – the bathroom might as well be China. Oh, then I got it. Oh, then I got it.

Ever since then, once the heart is open, once that orbit of concern is extended, you can’t rescind it. This is one of the hard but beautiful values of suffering. Once having experienced that, then when I chance to see someone in a grocery line who’s slow because of a – forget being patient. I go help them with their groceries. Why didn’t I think of that the first time?

MM: You were too busy being annoyed.

MN: Right. This is just a nice, simple example of how inhabiting our own humanity honestly, acknowledging our worst angels, allows us to, and when we do suffer, it allows us for our heart to expand. It allows another room at a time for the temple to become the world.

MM: Beautiful. You mentioned our true inheritance. I would love to hear you say more about it. That’s the second part of the book, I believe.

MN: Yes. I think that there’s this wonderful paradox in all of life, that certainly we can learn from each other. I still believe in having teachers, and not just human teachers. The tree is a teacher, the ocean, the whale. And there is a direct inheritance of our direct experience of life that no one can teach us and no one can take away. Through the lens of that true inheritance, I can be the best student possible, because I am then most open to what I can learn.

I think it’s a question I often ask when I’m with folks in groups, ask people to reflect on or journal about is, “Can you describe one quality that you were born with that no one gave you and no one can take away? Just one. Then if you can, what would it mean to befriend it?” One of the things that I opened that section with is that it leads to a description of, “What does it mean to be a spiritual warrior?” Certainly there are lots of – from all traditions, so just adding one more take on that. It led me to – what triggered this was discovering that the word “war” goes back to an Indo-European word, wers, W-E-R-S, which means to confuse and mix up. That all war, and all the conflict and violence that comes from war, is the result of confusion.

A spiritual warrior is one who is devoted to the clearing of confusion, within us and between us. What that means for everyone, we all have to describe that and understand that, and act on it. One way we can help each other stay awake and in this time of forced Sabbath is to, wherever we are in this time, can you describe what’s one area of confusion within you, around you? What can you do, what can you devote yourself to, that will clear that confusion?

MM: This is intimately connected to the Buddhist idea about ignorance being the source of suffering, and the thing that blocks us from inherent goodness. It’s confusion, it’s not evil.

MN: Yes. I think in the Dao, I think it was Stephen Mitchell, I ran across where he translates “sin” in the ancient Chinese as – there were two things. One was opaqueness, not evil. Like blocked, you can’t see, and missing our mark. Missing our mark. That means that really, all

of spiritual practice is course correction. Not elimination of our humanity like we're talking about these things. It's not – if anyone were listening here to us, "Oh, I'm not going to do that, I'll get rid of it." No, we are human, we will always do it, but how do we recognize it? Which is the work of self-awareness and course correct. What is our, I like to think of it and talk about it as our personal practice of return.

MM: Nice. You talk about the difference between the fire of aliveness and the fire of circumstance. That's an interesting dichotomy to me. Can you explain that?

MN: Yes. Well, it feels under all of that, and we'll get right to that, but under it is that every human being is an archetype, everyone will have to both survive and thrive. Those, both of them, are important. If we only survive, that's freezing part of that wheel of life, and we don't thrive, what's the point? If we thrive wildly without any respect and attention to survival, we're not going to thrive very long. You and I could have this wonderful conversation while crossing the street. If we don't look and see a truck's coming, there's the end of it. It's simple, and so one other thought and then we'll get to the fires, the two fires, is that in order to survive, we have to develop a skill at risk management.

In order to thrive inwardly, we have to develop a skill of risk enhancement. Those are skills, there's nothing valued about either, but often we can confuse those. Now to the fire. In the world of circumstance in the land of survival, there is this fire of circumstance where we can get burned, and we need to know how to douse the fire, whether it's literal fire – you have to watch the stove that you light – or whether it's the fire of passion, or the fire of anger or the fire of curiosity to the point that we're more curious than compassionate. I remember driving one time with my wife Susan and we passed – it happens from time to time – we passed a dead deer on the side of the road. It had been slightly eaten by other animals so it was open, and I momentarily felt bad for the deer, but I was more curious, like having a glimpse of the innards as we drove by. While my wife, Susan, which is totally her, she immediately identified with the moment the deer died, but my curiosity had eclipsed my compassion in that moment. How do we douse the fire of circumstance?

On the other side in the world of thriving, the fire of aliveness needs to be fed. It needs to never go out. We need to put everything, our ignorance, our suffering, our insight, our learning on it. I often think that – this was something else I've been thinking and working with lately – is that the way fire needs wood, the soul needs care. It doesn't matter what we care for, the soul doesn't make any distinction. "Just feed me care," to keep the fire of the soul alive while it's in you.

I think one of the deep ongoing learnings of any individual is how do we discern those two fires? How do we not fuel the wrong one and douse the wrong one? What does it mean very specifically in each of our lives, and how do we practice that? How do we keep the fire of aliveness going, and how do we douse the fire of circumstance when it's out of control? When it's too much? I think one of the things that has been a great teacher for me in retrieving this book is that. Before I fell into this book, I hadn't ever really seen that. It's really helped me look at my own experience and my own inwardness and relational experience differently.

MM: I think particularly right now for people, because they're so overwhelmed with the fire of circumstance.

MN: That's it, and we have to feed more than the fire of circumstance.

MM: Yes, and so we feed the fire of aliveness in a moment like this, how? Through care?

MN: Through care. I mean, it's interesting because all the things that we all believe in and have learned from all the traditions, they're all described as artifacts, but now we take them off the wall of the museum, and they're tools in the toolbox. Presence, listening, holding nothing back. Really being present. If I'm feeling overwhelmed by fear, how do I breathe and drop until I reach the point under my fear? Not turn from my fear. I think that's because- and this is one of the things again that echoes from my cancer journey to now is in our sheltered time, I like to think of us more than sheltered in place as growing in place. There is plenty of fear coming in. When we meet it, how do we feed more than fear? One of the ways is to- fear, I've learned, is to be moved through, not obeyed. Whenever I've asked my fear what I should do, it tells me to be more afraid.

MM: How else is it going to stay alive?

MN: Right, it's saying, "No, otherwise you're going to exile me. No, you keep going." This sense of by letting other things in, by right side- because I've learned here and it happened back then, but now every day, it doesn't matter how centered I am, there's something now, usually from the news or what's happening because of all of this out in the world, that hooks my fear. I've almost come to say, "Where is it going to show up today? Where will it be today?" We have a very healthy dog who's our little dog child, and she rarely has anything wrong with her, she's wonderfully healthy, thank God. She had this stomachache when this all started. All of a sudden, it's not so easy to go to the vet. What do we do?

What if it's more than a stomachache? We got through it, she was fine, but then I realized the next day, "Oh, that's where the fear went sideways." That day. It took that and it made it more than it was, and now I could put all of the fear from the pandemic, into, "What if, what if, what if?" Again, we're not going to- as human beings, I'm not going to say, "Oh, well, I'll never do that again." No, I'll probably do it today after we get off the phone, but the work of self-awareness is, "Oh, I recognize this. Yes. Oh, yes. This is familiar." Course correct. "What can I let in other than my fear, so that my fear is in me and I'm not in it?"

MM: Is that part of what you call the covenant of practice?

MN: Yes, very much so. The covenant of practice is a commitment not to have things figured out, but to stay in the constant learning of how we course correct, return to balance, which- balance to me is not, we tend to think or I think it's mis-education to think of balance as often we'd say, "I'm not going to be too high, and I'm not going to be too low." Balance to me is more like a rowboat that's in the exact middle of a strong current. You could not be more immersed in that current, but you stay in the center of it. It's more a matter of thoroughness, than lopping off the fullness of our human experience. That's the covenant of practice.

There's an interesting paradox about practice, which is humbling, and it's best understood through sports, right? You practice for the game. The practice is for life. Take Derek Jeter, who's no longer playing, but the greatest shortstops of all time. How many thousands of grounders did he practice for the one unpredictable bounce in the game?

We practice, we meditate, we do these things. I find that when I am so thoroughly, wholeheartedly in a moment of practice, the reward is it dissolves. It stops being practice and it dissolves into an unscripted moment of pure living, and that's the reward.

MM: That's the reward.

MN: That's the reward. All of a sudden it stops being practice, because we've been having at it.

MM: Right, and that's the seeker's journey, isn't it?

MN: Yes.

MM: I love how you say the task of coming alive and staying alive is beautiful and endless. I think that really says it all.

MN: Well, thank you. It is endless, and why would we want it to end? I feel that all the things we're talking about, if you and I were actors, and a famous film director described everything that we've been talking about and then offered it to us as a part, we would think it was the part of the lifetime.

MM: It's true.

MN: And it is.

[laughter]

MM: I love it. Thank you Mark. That was great.

MN: You're so welcome. It's always a joy to be together.

MM: It's great to talk to you as always, so good luck with the book and good luck with getting through this thing, and I hope to see you in New York one of these days.

[crosstalk]

MN: Me too. I hold on to that. I so miss New York and think of everyone there, and blessings to you too. Are you working on something new right now or?

MM: I'm writing a book about Emerson.

MN: Oh, my God. That's fabulous.

MM: Emerson as a spiritual teacher, which it actually hasn't quite been done that way before.

MN: Well, if there's anything I can do to support you with that, let me know.

MM: Thank you. Thank you, my friend.

MN: All right.

MM: You'll have three books done by the time –

[laughter]

MM: All right, be well.

MN: All right, you too.

MM: Take care. Bye.

MN: Bye bye.

[00:42:54] [END OF AUDIO]