Monday Night Meditation

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 35:13

Good evening.

It's a pleasure to welcome you here to this Monday night sitting group at Spirit Rock Center. If we've not met before, my name is Jack Kornfield.

How many of you are here at Spirit Rock for the first time? Oh, wonderful. Welcome. And if you happen to see a hand go up next to you or near you and you've been here for a while, at the break, just introduce yourself. Say hello to that person or welcome them here. Thank you.

Monday Night Sitting Group has been ongoing now for thirty-two, thirty-three years. Spirit Rock has grown over the course of this time in this beautiful valley that we received from the Nature Conservancy, through the care of a whole community committed to the twin principles of compassion and wakefulness—or inner freedom of heart—which are the essence of Buddhist spiritual teachings, but really are part of all wise spiritual life.

We have all kinds of classes and retreats and programs: for educators, for healthcare professionals, family program teachings for parenting as a spiritual practice, informed citizenship as a spiritual practice, and retreats of three days, a week, a month. Whatever brings you here, it's really a pleasure to welcome you. We open our gates to everyone—whatever your orientation, your sexual orientation, whatever your class or color or race or background. The Dharma gates open and say: you are welcome here.

Monday night has served as a gateway, an introduction for many people to Spirit Rock Center and to the teachings we have here. What we do on Mondays is really pretty simple. We sit for thirty to thirty-five minutes in meditation with a little bit of guidance and a lot of silence. Then after the sitting, we take a break of ten to fifteen minutes to stretch or relax, usually followed by a talk, as it will be this evening—some teaching, sometimes dialogue or questions and answers.

I've been teaching one Monday a month at this point. Not quite retired, but taking time to do some other things and not doing it weekly as I had for such a long time. So when I get to come back on Mondays and be with everybody, it's actually kind of fun and wonderful. I'm glad to see you.

Whatever brought you here, again, welcome. The invitation is to find your own way to quiet the mind, tend the heart, and listen in some deep way.

Let us begin with a period of meditation.

Let yourself find a way to sit that's both comfortable and alert. If you're in a chair, you might let your feet be flat on the floor, sitting upright so there's some sense of dignity and presence, but also a graciousness and ease. If you're on a cushion on the floor or a bench, find a way to sit where your body is stable and comfortable.

When you feel present in this way—comfortable and stable—allow your eyes to close gently for this time. First, bring your attention to the quality of presence with your own body, mind, and heart. Notice: here you are, alive, sitting halfway between heaven and earth in this human form, taking your seat. There will be the state of your body, the moods and feelings that are present, the thoughts that come through. Notice that you can begin to be aware of just what is here and now.

Let this sense of awareness—of mindful awareness or loving awareness, we'll call it—attend to your experience as you begin to sit.

What you often notice as you start to pay attention is that the mind is easily distracted. After a few seconds or a little bit of time being present, the attention goes off into thinking or planning or remembering, or goes to other sounds and sensations. So to help deepen the quality of presence underneath the waves of thoughts and plans and memories, become aware of the wave of the breath, how the body is breathing itself.

Feel the breath as coolness in the nostrils, swirling, tingling in the back of the throat, coolness at the upper lip—or the rise and fall of chest or belly, or the whole body breathing. If it's at all difficult to sense the breath, take one hand and put it on your belly and feel the rise and fall of belly in the palm of your hand. You can just leave it there for quite a while.

As you rest in the present, feel each breath as it comes and goes. Let the attention to breathing, with some ease and calming, invite the body and mind to come together just here. Let the thoughts and feelings and sounds rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

After just a minute or two, you'll notice that while you attend to the breath for a short time, one of the waves becomes so strong it pulls your attention from the breath, and you find yourself planning or remembering. Or there arises sadness or excitement or some other emotion or strong sensation that carries you away from the breath.

When the waves stay in the background, just feel this breath, each breath as it comes and goes. But when a wave becomes strong and captures the attention, let go of the breathing and turn as if to welcome it with a bow. You can name it gently: "Oh, planning," or "remembering," or "sadness," or "excitement," or "longing." As you name it—"sad, sad" or "excited, excited" or "planning"—feel that wave move through your body and mind.

When it has passed, or you're at ease with it, return back to feel the breath again for a time. Rest just here in the present moment, with this breath.

...or this strong wave of experience, naming it gently.

And remember to keep the heart tender, to receive all that arises with a spirit of compassion and kindness. This breath, or this moment's experience—receive it with loving awareness.

Come back to the breath when you can, quite gently, like training the puppy: sit, stay. Feel how the body breathes itself in its own rhythms. And with each breath, a sense of inviting ease and calm to grow.

Whatever is present, feel how the breath breathes itself in the midst of it all, and relax into the breathing. Rest in it with a sense of growing ease, calm.

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