Peace is Possible | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 45:49

I was reflecting on what to speak about tonight, and I wanted to talk about vastness and space. But even as I started to make notes for myself, the war kept creeping in. It just didn't want to be ignored.

And here we are. We could start with Charles Dickens' extraordinary sentence: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In many of our cases, we have considerable well-being in our lives, and at the same time there are these wars going on for thousands and millions of people. We can watch the Oscars—I'm glad that CODA won; it's an amazing movie—but then we change the screen and we see the children of Mariupol or Kharkiv, and the incredible suffering. Heartbreaking.

So I want to reflect together tonight, because it's not just the heartbreak of the war in Ukraine. "Long have you suffered," said the Buddha, "from conflict and war." It's the pandemic. It's climate change. It's the wars in so many places—as we know, in Ethiopia and Tigray, in Libya, still in Syria, in Myanmar. We could go on down the list. And then there are the cries for justice: economic justice, racial justice, continuing racism in the world, continuing economic insecurity for so many.

And now we have Russia again as our big enemy. There we go. For a while it was the immigrants, or the Mexicans, or the Central Americans, or the gays, or it's the anti-vaxxers, or it's the vaxxers, or it's the radical liberals, or it's the white supremacist conservatives. Now Russia's our enemy. Enemy du jour, I think we should say. And the military industrial complex is very happy about this. It's been tough not having a really good enemy to fight.

We're a country that—when I looked it up before this talk—if you talk about regime change, depending on the list, we have meddled in twenty, thirty, forty, eighty different countries. From Iran and Chile, from assassinating Patrice Lumumba, from the Philippines, from countries across Central America, from Iraq—we have toppled the leadership in country after country. We, the peaceful American people. This is part of what Eisenhower called the military industrial complex, where we voted to defund the State Department, not to create a Department of Peace, and upped our military budget to trillions of dollars over the years—and then worry why we don't feel safe.

So how do we practice in these times? Because this is where we are as human beings. How do we navigate? The media, of course, tries to hype things up and exacerbate fear and anxiety and polarization. And the results are anger and depression.

If you read the Buddhist texts, one of the interesting things is that Mara—who, as most of you know, is the god who personifies greed, hatred, and delusion, who came to attack the Buddha as he sat peacefully

under the Bodhi tree the night of his enlightenment—returns after the Buddha's enlightenment forty different times in the texts to try to hook the Buddha or bother him or challenge him. Almost always the Buddha says, "Oh, is that you, Mara? Are you back again?"

Here's what we don't want to hear. I could weep when I say it. There is no easy fix to this.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn—who was two generations before Navalny, who is now in a Siberian camp—was one of the greatest Russian writers, himself thrown into a camp in Siberia. He said, "If only it were all so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who among us is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?"

It's not just the enemy out there, the enemy du jour, whoever it happens to be. It's also that within our own hearts.

My friend Roger Walsh, who is a spiritual seeker, MD, PhD, psychiatrist, and various other things—in his multiple studies, he read the entire Encyclopedia of World Religions, trying to understand them, from Ahura Mazda at the beginning to Zoroaster at the end. I asked him, "Roger, what did you learn from that?"

He said, "I saw that in these hundreds of religions, with hundreds of billions of followers over the years, they all had creation stories. They all had stories of good and evil and how we should behave. They all had stories of the place of human beings and the environment and the cosmos—all kinds of beautiful, wonderful stories. And by the end, it was very clear that there were all these stories placed upon the mystery. There wasn't the right story. We're actually living in this extraordinary, vast mystery of consciousness and human life. And we explain it to ourselves because we're storytelling creatures."

But as the great mythologist Joseph Campbell said—and I had the fortune of teaching with him at Esalen back in the day—if you want a myth, you should make it really big, or maybe none at all, because that's how big the mystery is.

But here we are. This is also called samsara, the cycle of suffering that follows grasping and greed, fear and anger, hatred and ignorance and confusion. These become the seeds that keep it going, and we can see it in the world. As the Buddha says, in war there are no victors. Because it happens to everyone.

What then? How do we practice?

I remember when I was living in the forest monastery at Ajahn Chah's, in a province that borders Cambodia and Laos, toward the Vietnamese end of southern Thailand and Southeast Asia. There was a big U.S. air base right nearby, so we would often see bombers and fighter jets fly over on the way to Vietnam or Cambodia.

One day we had a visit from some folks I knew about. They were a group—I think they were Quakers or

international peacekeepers—who had gone to volunteer and live in Vietnam during the war, trying to make peace between people. They were really brave and beautiful. They said, "We can't stand by. We have to do something. We are going to go there."

They came into the monastery burned out. They'd been in the middle of so much conflict, and it was really hard. They were looking for a little respite, but they also complained to Ajahn Chah. They said, "There's a war going on and you all are just sitting on your behinds meditating. What about taking care of the world? What about compassion and action?"

But they stayed for a while—ten or twelve days. Ajahn Chah didn't even answer them at first. He said, "You stay here for a bit. We'll talk about it." That was his beautiful answer, really.

What they could see was this: if you live in a war zone, everything is in danger. The temples were being destroyed. Things were being stolen. People turn against one another. There's so much fear and violence. And this monastery was an island of peace and sanity. There might be some fighter jets flying overhead on occasion, but you could lose your gold ring and someone would find it, save it, put it on the altar so that you might get it back. You could find yourself lost at night and people would go and help you. It was a place of peace and love.

As Ajahn Chah said to them later, it was a living library of what was possible. "Wars come and go," he said. "And around here, we've seen a lot of wars. We need to show that there is another way."

He continued: "We human beings are constantly in combat, at war to escape the fact of being so limited—limited by so many circumstances we cannot control, things that we wish were different. But instead of escaping, we continue to create suffering, waging war with evil, waging war with what is too small or too big or too soon or too late, waging war with what's too short or too long or right or wrong, courageously carrying on the battle."

"It's time," he said, "to stop the war."

And we know where the war starts. It starts in the human heart. To make your own heart a zone of peace.

I remember when I went to a temple in Vietnam during the middle of fighting in the Mekong Delta—I don't remember which year it was, maybe 1969 or 1970—visiting the temple of the peacemaking monk known as the Coconut Monk. On this little island, it was peaceful, and you could see the helicopters and firefights on the horizon. All the signage and all the teachings proclaimed this a place of peace. At the far end of the island, on a hill, there were two very tall statues, maybe forty feet tall.

I was used to seeing long reclining Buddhas and great standing Buddhas in these countries. But these were two statues—one of Buddha and one of Jesus—and they had their arms around each other's shoulders, as if to say: yes, there's a war happening, but there's another way.

You know how often I quote Thich Nhat Hanh: when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with

storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

So make your heart a zone of peace. Set your compass to your highest or deepest intentions, because this is what's given to you as a human being.

"Others will be cruel," said the Buddha. "We shall be kind. Others will kill living beings. We shall protect living beings—thus we will incline the heart. Others will steal. We shall be generous—thus we will incline the heart. Others will engage in harmful sexuality. We will respect sexuality—thus we will incline the heart. Others will speak falsehoods and malicious gossip. We will speak truth that is of benefit—thus we will incline the heart. Others will be greedy. We will be generous—thus we shall incline the heart. Others will be unmindful. We shall establish ourselves in mindfulness and compassion—thus we shall incline the heart."

This is what's possible. And the thing is, we know this. Part of what's so heartbreaking in seeing the wars in so many places and the violence—I went up to the battlefront in Laos. I was still in the Peace Corps, working on medical teams in the villages, tropical medicine, mostly malaria but also some typhoid and leprosy programs. I had a friend on the other side of the Mekong River who was in the international volunteer force, which was probably run by the CIA since the Peace Corps wouldn't go into Vietnam or Laos during the conflict. He asked if I wanted to go up to the front, and being young and foolish—young men always ask, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?"—I said sure.

So we commandeered a jeep and drove through the mountains. It was the narrow part of Laos, which means it's only about a hundred miles or so from the Mekong River to the border of Vietnam. We drove on this dirt road through the mountains and little villages and came to a hilltop above a stream where the Royal Lao Army was encamped.

I met the officer, a major running that encampment. We talked some about the war. He had a good little library—books about revolution in different places, how they'd won, who lost. He was pretty sophisticated. We sat down and he poured us tea. I asked how things were going. He said it was pretty quiet, but now that we'd come it was almost afternoon, almost bathing time.

He went out on the bluff and shouted across the stream to the encampment of the Pathet Lao, the Lao Communist Army. "We're going to take our bath first today, all right?" And the guy on the other side called back, "All right, sure." So the men went down, put on their bathing cloths, washed in the stream, and came back. Then they called out, "Okay, it's your turn," and we watched the soldiers from the other side come down to bathe.

The Lao culture is a very peaceful culture—which shows what we can make in this world. That's the beautiful thing, and part of the point of the story. Behind the Pathet Lao communist army on the other side were Vietnamese soldiers who were quite fierce, pushing them forward. And behind us, on my side of

the Royal Lao army, across the Mekong River, were the encampments of the US Special Forces pushing the Lao to fight in that direction. These guys knew it was a proxy war. It actually had almost nothing to do with their country, and they didn't want to do it. They knew in themselves that it was not the right thing.

War can sound noble. There are all these heroic myths—the Trojan War and the rest.

Or you read of Genghis Khan or the Mongols, or read Sun Tzu about war, *The Art of War*, or you read and learn the mythologies of the Incas and the Aztecs on war, or the Ashanti—Tano, who's the god of war in Ashanti culture in West Africa—or you read the Bhagavad Gita, a spiritual text about war. It makes it sound heroic.

But there are other stories.

I was living in a monastery for a while on the Malay Peninsula. During this time when I was a monk—this would have been 1971, '72, something like that—there was still a lot of armed conflict, not only in Laos and Cambodia, but in Thailand and the mountains. There were what they called terrorists. That's the generic term for the ones you don't like, but sometimes they do wreak terror. Sometimes, sometimes not. But anyway, there they were, the communists—they had different names for them.

Ajahn Chah was kind of a peacemaker abbot. He would go and do blessings on all the soldiers on the different sides and give them protective amulets to wear. But still the firefights continued.

One night it came really close to the temple. The temple was in a rubber forest in the Malay Peninsula mountains, and you could see the flashes from the guns at night. It was pretty close. The next morning we got up, did our chanting and meditation and so forth. Then I was out in a little meadow, a clearing really, doing some walking meditation. There was an old monk there, a local monk, who was sitting. I saw helicopters come onto the ridge about a mile or mile and a half away, and you could see them dropping canister bombs—these explosions would happen.

I said to the monk, "Oh, it looks like they're bombing those communists, or whatever they call them, who came down, who they were fighting with last night."

He shook his head. He said, "Oh, there's no communists there. They live in the caves about thirteen kilometers north, that way around in that valley. That's where they are."

I said, "Well, why are they bombing up there then?"

He said, "Well, if they kill them all, who would give them the helicopters and all the equipment and all the money?"

How about that? How about that? It really makes you want to weep.

Like the friend I know who was working as the executive assistant for the head of one of the biggest oil companies during one of these wars. She said the thing that surprised her most was that the company was

selling oil—it was the Vietnam War, still back then—selling the oil to the South and to the North. Big surprise.

Oh nobly born, say the Buddhist texts, remember what's possible for you as a human being.

Here's the problem. The brilliant biologist E.O. Wilson at Harvard put it this way: human beings have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike powers. That's where we're stuck. Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike powers.

And yet, oh nobly born, something in us knows there's another way. We know it's possible, as William Butler Yeats, the poet, said: we can make our hearts and minds so like still water that beings gather around us that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life, because of our quiet. We can become that place of peace.

So what to do, dear bodhisattvas who you are, dear beings committed to the ending of suffering?

There are the outer responses. I have friends who've already gone to Poland to work on the border and support refugees. Friends who went to work with World Central Kitchen, one of the most beautiful organizations feeding hungry refugees around the world. Friends who are there as translators, friends who are there offering teachings, friends who are there working with Doctors Without Borders.

But of course, it's not just there. It's Myanmar and it's Darfur, which is still happening, and the conflicts in Latin America and Tigray—I don't need to go down the list—and Libya.

So the first response is to tend the wounds and feed the hungry and stand up for peace in whatever way you can, welcome the refugees, engage yourself in the politics of the time in a way that makes a difference.

But there's also an inner response needed.

There are three *vipallāsa*—the word in Sanskrit or Pali—illusions that we have.

One is the illusion of permanence—that you think things will last. And yet the very last words of the Buddha, some of his very last: all things are impermanent. You may want them to stay the same. You may want the country, the people, the culture, the world to stop and remain as it is, to keep what you have.

A poem from the New Yorker:

What now? There's a magnificent sand castle that's taken years to build, a row of pink seashells for gables, rooms of pebble and driftwood. This is your life. Then comes the affair, the nagging blood work, a freeway pileup. The tide moves in, the water eats your work like a drove of wild birds. There's debris, a tatter of seagrass. I'm here to tell you the tide will never stop coming in. I'm here to tell you whatever you build will be ruined, so make it beautiful.

And that's where we could weep, because the world itself is sacred and beautiful. And yet we cannot hold on to it. This is where we started in our sitting: praise and blame, gain and loss, war and peace, pleasure and pain, birth and death. The illusion of permanence. It is not permanent. All is impermanent like the tide.

Then there's the illusion of ownership—that there's someone, you, who thinks you own your body. Good luck. You can take care of it, please. Take care of your car too, and your garden and your neighborhood. But you don't own it. If you owned it, it would do what you want, right? "Don't get old." It doesn't work that way. The whole sense of self and ownership is a fiction, constructed. We are part of a whole. We are consciousness itself playing in these different forms. And none of it can be owned. It comes and goes.

And then there's the illusion that we can sustain pleasure. This is a great one in this country, especially with Amazon. I love it actually, I have to say. I know it's not really great and I'm politically incorrect, but you go on, you see something, one little click—buy with one click—and the next day it appears. It's like Santa Claus and a magic genie. Of course, there's a lot of destruction involved in all of that too. But this is our culture: keep the pleasure going. Try to avoid loss, pain, sadness, the end of things. Blame death.

So these are the illusions. From the text of the Dhammapada: "Your body is like a fragile jar. Make your home in the untroubled heart or mind. Your body is like foam, a wave, a shadow of a shadow. A bubble, a mirage—this world, a dream. Escape the king of death. Let go of this body and this attachment and these dreams. The wind cannot overturn a mountain, and neither praise nor blame can overturn the heart of one who has let go. Few cross the river. Most are stranded, running up and down on the riverbank. But the wise, who harm no one—they release anger and fear. They live in love and do their work, inner and outer, and make an end to sorrow."

O nobly born, remember that you have the capacity for a peaceful heart.

Amidst it all. The world longs for this. You are loving awareness. You are consciousness itself. You are the witness to all of this. And even now, as you practice, as you meditate, you can invite this sense of vastness, of equanimity, of a peaceful heart.

You step out of the small sense of self, out of the body of fear, out of all the dramas. That doesn't mean they're not there. You worry about people you love, you worry about places you love, you worry about people you don't even know. All that is human and natural. And you can hold all of it in compassion, vast compassion. But don't forget who you really are. You are loving awareness itself. Don't get caught in the dramas of the wars and keep them going.

James McNeill Whistler, the acclaimed painter and artist, attended West Point as a cadet in his early years. As part of the training there, cadets were supposed to sketch military campaigns and strategize their execution. Being a good artist, Whistler was asked to do a drawing of a bridge across a river—the implication being that this would show how the army could cross to the other side and continue its

conquest. He drew a scene somewhat bucolic. He made a nice stone arch bridge over the river. And then he drew a little boy with a fishing rod, fishing off the bridge. The commandant of that class saw it and said, "Get that boy off the bridge."

So he redid the drawing. He put the little boy with his fishing pole sitting on the bank of the river and let the bridge be what it was. The commander said, "Get that boy out of the picture." So Whistler redrew the bridge and the river, and where the boy had sat on the riverbank, he put a little headstone, a little tombstone. He then quit.

That's really the moral of the story. Something in him knew it was not the right place for him. And I don't mean that as a put-down of West Point particularly, more than anything else. But there's something in us that knows there's another way. The children who are in danger in Kiev, in Darfur, the Rohingya children—they're all our children.

Steven Pinker, who wrote *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*, the anthropologist, philosopher, and historian at Harvard, claims through his statistics and charts—and they're actually quite impressive—that we're doing better as human beings now than we ever have. There are fewer wars. There's less slavery. There's less terrible treatment of children and women. Oh, there's still slavery. We know this. We know women are mistreated. We know there's still war. But when he charts it, it's declining. There's less of these things. He said we are perhaps evolving, in fits and starts, slowly. We're in a time of great transition—as a globe and as a species. The climate, the pandemic, the injustice and racism—they're all pressing on us to live in a different way.

And if you live with a peaceful heart, the point is not to let your heart get hardened, not to turn your gaze away, but to see another possibility. To see it with a great heart of compassion, and see it fresh, and say: we don't have to do this.

One of the very first neuroscience studies ever done about Buddhist meditation was conducted in the 1960s by two researchers in Japan named Kasamatsu and Hirai. They did an interesting study about habituation. Normally, when something repeats itself in our consciousness, after a while we become habituated to it—we start to ignore it and move on to other things. You all know how that happens. Sometimes it's even the voice of somebody you live with—but I shouldn't say that. It can be all kinds of things that we grow habituated to.

What they wanted to study was whether the training of attention affected that habituation mechanism—because it's a strategic mechanism in our nervous system, designed so that we don't have to keep paying attention to the same thing over and over again. It allows us to be more attuned to things that might be dangerous or might be an opportunity. You can think way back: if you heard a clattering in the tree, looked out, and discovered it was just a limb banging against another branch, you'd realize it wasn't dangerous. Then you'd hear the clattering, but you'd ignore it.

The research that was so interesting was that they brought in some senior meditators and hooked them up to electronic monitoring. And the meditators didn't get habituated. Each time a certain stimulus came, other people—those they had simply sit and be quiet—after a while, they'd hear a piece of music or a sound or a voice. When they heard the same thing over and over again, they started to ignore it. You could see in the brain signal there was just a flattening. But the people who were meditating and had practiced—there was a beginner's mind of freshness each time.

Now is the time for us to look afresh. "It is better to light a candle than curse the gathering darkness," say the prophets—to foster a wiser society. Even though Mara will visit, and Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that we have tea with Mara on occasion, we need to vote for a department of peacemaking. We need to bring social and emotional learning more fully into education everywhere. We need to learn truth and reconciliation as a way of living in our communities, and conflict resolution.

The foolish look at events, says the Buddha, and the wise look at causes. We need to plant the seeds of wellbeing and respect to make a wise society where those who are vulnerable are cared for, where there is genuine justice. It may sound impossible, but I think we're improving. I think Steven Pinker is right.

Henry Moore, one of the greatest sculptors of the twentieth century, said, "The secret of life is to have a task, a vision, something you devote your entire life to. And the most important thing is it must be something you cannot possibly do." He's talking like the Bodhisattva who takes the vow: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to bring liberation to them all"—to end suffering.

We have the possibility, we have the capacity, dear ones, to embody what we care about, to live it and make it come alive in our own hearts, to be that zone of peace. How we respond when conflict arises around us, in our culture, in the world—to plant seeds of goodness. As we do so, we become—I think Alice Walker coined the phrase—"We are the ones we've been waiting for." You are the ones you've been waiting for.

In the marketplace, in the family, in community and business, let there be respect and healing, wisdom. Join with others. We can't do it alone.

Together with my teaching colleague and friend Tara Brach, I have started an online offering called Cloud Sangha, because one of the most frequent questions I've been asked over the years of traveling around the world is, "How do I find a teacher?"—especially if I live in Des Moines or Tampa or Belfast, Ireland. How do I have a teacher? And it turns out one of the blessings that's come from the pandemic, where we've learned to connect online, is that we can make connections with teachers for people around the world. Through Cloud Sangha, you can sign up for small groups lasting several months or a year and become part of a weekly gathering of eight or nine people with a teacher—to talk about your life, your practice, all the things that matter to you in your spiritual life, and to listen to others and learn from one another. The people who are in it love it. I'm telling you about it because it might serve some of you, but I'm also telling you because we need each other.

What I've been giving voice to—"O nobly born"—is true: that peace is possible in the human heart, that there are Nelson Mandelas who can walk out of twenty-seven years in Robben Island prison with such magnanimity and compassion that they change an entire nation and the imagination of the world. This is possible for us as human beings. And not just Nelson, but the people singing from balconies during the pandemic, delivering food—the smallest gestures.

You carry the medicine the world needs. But you need to get quiet. You need to find a way to make your heart a zone of peace. It's why we practice. And from that quiet place, as Yeats said, our stillness allows others to see clearly too. We join hands, we join hearts, we come together.

And I close these teachings by reading yet again what I read a month ago—John O'Donohue's poem, "For Peace":

As the fever of day calms toward twilight,
May all that is strained in us come to ease.
We pray for all who suffered violence today.
May an unexpected serenity surprise them.
For those who risk their lives each day for peace,
May their hearts glimpse providence at the heart of history itself.
That those who make riches from violence and war
Might hear in their dreams the cries of the lost.

That we might see through our fear of each other a new vision to heal our fatal attraction to aggression. That those who enjoy the privilege of peace might not forget their tormented brothers and sisters. That the wolf might lie down with the lamb, that our swords be beaten into plowshares, and no hurt or harm be done anywhere along this holy mountain.

So let your eyes close for a moment. Just sit quietly. And remember what touched you or reminded you tonight of your own goodness, your own great heart of compassion, your own capacities to bring your gifts to this world.

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