Monday Night Meditation

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 44:14

Good evening, what a pleasure.

It was very sweet arriving because I came about an hour ago and it was just finishing getting dark. There was a little bit of the moon and kind of not quite a black sky yet, still lit up a little bit. It's actually a beautiful night out there. It's cold—it's winter—but it's gorgeous. And you are too, so what to say. Thank you for being here.

This is now maybe the forty-first or forty-second year of the Monday night sitting group that we started. For a lot of years it was in the trailers that we had here in the meadow, and before that in the Fairfax Community Church. Some of you who are that old may even remember. The point of it has been to come together to remember what it's like to quiet our minds and tend the heart and be together in some sense of community doing so—and of course, having some teachings or conversation. All of those are important.

Spirit Rock has grown over these decades. It has so many programs of short and long retreats and trainings and practices, and has had thousands of people come through. When we look at the world—and there's actually a phrase, "the world," in the Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts, and it's not like "the world, whoopee!" It's like "the world... oh yeah, right." But at this time in the world, to have places of refuge and places where we steady the heart and quiet ourselves is really important and valuable as a reminder, as a support.

What we usually do on Monday night is meditation for a time, then take a break for five minutes to stretch, and then some teachings followed by dialogue or questions and response. Tonight is also the launch—I don't know what the right word is—the celebration for this new book that came out this last week. I was reading it after I got a copy. It's kind of fun to actually get it when it's finally printed, different than all the drafts and the electronic versions. I had been feeling ambivalent about it, thinking it was okay. And then I read it and thought, "Hey, I really like this. This is actually pretty good."

I got a call from the publisher, Sounds True Macmillan, saying I had done this beautiful course on great teaching stories, and would I like to write a book about that? I listened and said, "You know, I'm not really in the mood to write another book. I've got sixteen published books. I hardly have an unpublished thought. And I've got other things to do." They said, "Well, how about if we take those teachings and edit them into a book, and then you can add things and fix it up?" I said, "That's the kind of writing I like. Thank you." So they did, and they gave it to me, and I added a lot of things that I like or love. That's how it came about. I'll be reading and talking from that and other things about what I think is really helpful for us.

To start for tonight—I'm particularly aware that this is Thanksgiving week. I've been teaching an online course on forgiveness, and I had my class today. We talked about the forgiveness between the Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics, or the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or the Republicans and Democrats in the US. I asked, "So what does this teaching on forgiveness really touch for you?" People raised their hands electronically, and we had a conversation—and it was all about their families. Forget Ireland, forget Ukraine—"I'm going home, and I need some practices for that."

I reminded them that the Buddha and Jesus both had trouble when they went home, so they should expect that that's part of the game. Family is family. It's wonderful, it's family, and it's other things than that.

So tonight I want us, as we sit, to do a guided loving-kindness meditation. I'll talk about it a tiny bit and then we'll do it. The loving-kindness meditation as a practice was taught—as best we know, all these are kind of mythological stories as well that have been passed down for a couple of thousand years and more. But apparently there was a group of ardent monks and nuns who were meditating with the Buddha, and they went out into the forests so they could practice ardently. At nighttime, they got frightened because there were sounds of wild animals and unknown things.

You know, that was the equivalent of watching the news today. It does the same thing to our nervous system. And so they came running back and said, "What do we do? It's dangerous. It's scary out there." And the Buddha said, "Let me give you a practice that will help you deal with the kind of fears that come." And that was the first occasion to teach loving-kindness meditation—so that when you go back into the jungle, or watch the news, or whatever wild thing you do, you have that as a basis to tend and care for your own heart.

Now, one of the things that's cool about it, and you'll see as we go through the pedagogy, is that you start where it's easy. You don't do loving-kindness meditation and decide, "Okay, I'm going to start with whoever you consider the bad guys." I'm using that particular gender on purpose—there are a bunch of them, you may have noticed. But you don't start there. You actually start where it's most natural and loving and easy, and you soften the heart, and you open it, and you do a few more. Then you go to people that are a little bigger than just the close ones to you, and you wish them well—happiness and safety and so forth. And eventually, if you go through the progression over time, traditionally you go through neutral people. Neutral people are the ones you kind of notice—that person at the checkout place at your grocery store where you go regularly, or at the post office, someplace where you see people but don't really have much thought about them. And then you expand from that to mildly difficult people. Do any of you have mildly difficult people? Don't raise your hands. And then you go on from there.

The neutral people practice is actually kind of interesting. I was doing a retreat on my own of metta at Santa Sabina in San Rafael a couple of decades ago or more, and I was practicing metta, going through it systematically. I thought, "Okay, who's going to be my neutral person?" There was a gardener there, this guy who I would see periodically coming and trimming and cutting, and I'd nod to him. I was being quiet.

So I spent a day wishing him well as part of my long metta retreat. Safe, protected, happy—that was my practice. Of course, it made me happy. And then I carried on.

About two days later, I went downstairs and out toward the garden. Around the corner came this guy, and I looked up and said, "Oh, my neutral person—I love you!" It just changed the whole valence of my care, because I had invited him in, in a regular way, into my heart and realized, oh, we're in relation to one another.

Now this is a non-sequitur, but I'm going to say it anyway. Two days ago I did a daylong teaching here on inner technology for outer technology. Some of it was with designers and people who are creating outer technology, and some of it was just people talking about how they use technology or how their kids use it. A lot of it to start with, beside training the inner technology of calm and steadiness and clarity, was recognizing that we're in relationship to technology—that it's actually a relationship and we're embedded in it. We are, you know.

And you'll notice behind me this beautiful Chinese Kuan Yin. Usually she's depicted in the thangkas with hundreds or thousands of arms serving, and eyes to see the whole world, reaching out all these hands. Now she's just—no, she can do it online. She's checking, trying to stay connected to everybody.

Anyhow, it's said when you do metta, loving-kindness practice, that there are many blessings that come as your heart trains itself to be open and kind and loving. There's a list of forty—you know, the Buddha was a list maker. Your dreams become sweet. You fall asleep more easily. I mean, that's enough already, right? You waken contented. Your thoughts are pleasant as you cultivate loving-kindness. Your health improves. Angels and devas will love and protect you, even if you don't believe in them. Animals will sense your love and not harm you.

I think that was part of the Buddhist teaching for those monks and nuns. People will welcome you everywhere. Your babies will be happy in the womb and growing up. If you pass by an elephant, it will nod and bow and honor your loving kindness. You can go to the zoo and try it out. If you lose things, they will be returned to you. If you fall off a cliff, a tree will always be there to catch you. And the world will be more peaceful and loving around you.

So those are some of the forty benefits. This reflects what you might find in a monastery in Burma or Thailand, where they actually do this little recitation. Okay, now I'm motivated. I'm waiting for the elephant. I'm going to do it.

So let's do a bit of practice together. But one more thing first.

There is one basic instruction for all the kinds of meditation—and there are many, many kinds—that you do, and that is not to use it to judge yourself. "Oh, I'm no good at this metta, loving kindness. I must be a bad person. I can't do it." You know how it is, your unworthiness. It's actually kind of boring, but we won't go there for a moment. Honestly, come on, you're bigger than that.

But anyway, you don't want to use this with some ideal. It might be that your attention wanders. It might be that you hate it. And the dance in meditation isn't trying to fix that, but to get curious. "Hmm, I wonder why so much hatred is arising when I'm trying to do metta." Well, maybe I'm really pissed at that person. Which can happen.

I mean, one morning I was leading a retreat years ago, and it was my time to go in—I was scheduled to lead the loving kindness meditation—and I'd had a bad fight with my wife at the time, my ex. She said a bunch of things that were really wrong, we'll say, bad. And I was sitting there kind of steaming. But it was my job to say, "All right, now think of someone you care about and send them some thoughts. May you be safe and well." And I'd be quiet, thinking, "I'm going to call her. I'm going to talk to her and straighten this out." Okay, now think of someone else you love.

And it was so interesting because the mind has no pride. It will do anything. And so the practice is to hold all of that in kindness, to hold your humanity—the tainted glory of your humanity—all of it in loving kindness. All the difficult and beautiful and amazing and horrifying parts that you all have, that we have as humans.

Okay. Sit comfortably. It's very hard to do metta if your knees are killing you.

With metta there are meditations on gratitude and thanks, forgiveness. But here we'll start really simply.

Let your body be settled and at ease and in a comfortable posture. Notice how it's breathing itself, and invite a kind of calm and gentleness to simply hold this breathing body kindly. Notice the stillness, the invitation for things to settle down. Even if there's repeated thoughts or emotions, let them rise and fall like the waves of the ocean. And around them is just a kindness, a field of loving awareness that notices it all without judging, without trying to change—just a loving presence for all of your humanity.

And now let yourself think of, remember, picture in your mind's eye, someone who you have a natural feeling of love or kindness for. Some person or being where it's not conflicted. Basically, there's a natural caring. It could be a child, a friend.

It could even be your dog—you know, you come home and it wags its tail. It doesn't judge you.

Picture this being. And first of all, with this child, this person, simply gaze at them with your mind's eye and feel your natural caring. It's there.

Then in your own way, begin to wish them well. There are some traditional phrases I'll use, but you can modify them in whatever way feels right to your heart.

Can you picture this being?

May you be safe and protected.
May you be well in body and mind.

May you be healthy and strong.
May you be filled with loving-kindness.
May you hold your struggles in compassion.

Every being has their measure of struggles.

May you be peaceful and happy inwardly.

You can repeat it again with whatever language you choose as you gaze at them. *May you be safe, protected.* You want this for them. *May you be well and healthy. May you be filled with loving-kindness, held in it. May your struggles be held in compassion. May your heart be peaceful.*

Now bring into the heart and mind another person that you care about—again, where it's easy and natural, not terribly conflicted. Picture them, remember them, think of them. Let the loving-kindness open to include them in this field of care.

You gaze at them: *May you too be safe and protected. May you be healthy and well. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles with compassion—all your struggles, so kindly. May your heart be peaceful and happy, truly happy.*

Notice what it feels like to begin this well-wishing to beings you care about.

Now imagine these two standing across from you, gazing back at you. They look at you with kindly eyes and they say, "Just as you wish this well-being and love for us, we want to wish it for you. We want to return it." Because they also care.

Imagine or sense that they're looking at you kindly and saying: *May you too be safe and protected.* They want this for you. *May you be healthy and well. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles with compassion.* They're gazing at you. *Hold your struggles with compassion, with kindness. And may your heart be peaceful and happy.*

Take in their good wishes. If you're comfortable, put a hand on your heart. They're teaching you.

As they gaze kindly, you accept this and you say—it's hard—*May I be safe and protected,* just as they want for you. *May I be safe and protected.* They wish this for you. *May I be well and healthy, strong.* May it be so. Like you're blessing yourself, and they're with you. *May I be filled with kindness toward myself and the whole world. May I hold my struggles in compassion.*

You know what they are. Hold them all kindly.

And may my heart be peaceful and happy.

Let it sink in, this well-wishing, just as you wish this for these loved ones and friends. They gaze at you and say: you too, held in the field of loving-kindness.

Now expand it. Open the heart further and picture another person you want to add—someone you feel called to wish well. Again, not a tough one, but a natural one.

May you be safe and protected. May you be well and strong. May you be filled with kindness. May you hold your struggles in compassion, great compassion. May your heart be peaceful and happy.

And now expand it further. Think of a group of people. It could be family coming to Thanksgiving dinner, or friends, or co-workers—some group that you know. There they are, arising in your mind's eye, in your heart. You surround them with loving-kindness. Even though they're a mixed bag of humanity, your loving-kindness is way bigger, and you wish them well.

May you be safe and protected. May you be healthy and well. May you all be filled with kindness—remember and dwell and live in kindness. May you hold your struggles in compassion. And may your hearts be peaceful and happy.

Let the field of loving-kindness that's growing in you now extend, shine out like a lighthouse in all directions—in front of you and behind, to left and right, above and below. Wish beings in every direction on this land well: all the animals, the badgers and worms and mountain lions and crows. May all the beings of this place be happy and protected.

Then out across the land, across the valleys and waters—beings in the cities, beings in the countryside. The light of loving-kindness shines in every direction.

May all beings everywhere, far and near, young and old—may you all be safe and protected. May you be well and healthy, all beings, omitting none. May you all be filled with kindness. May you feel compassion for your struggles. Hold them in compassion. And may your hearts be at peace, whoever you are, wherever you are, beings of every kind. May your hearts be at peace and find true happiness.

You become the lighthouse of loving-kindness, illuminating all directions with care.

Staying with this quality of loving-kindness, allow your eyes to open and look around at the beings sitting near you. Catch their eye, check them out, and continue to wish them well, each one. May you be safe. May you be protected. May you be strong and healed. May you be filled with kindness, each of you. Look around, wish them well—you can do it. I know it's a little unusual, but you can do it. It's not really that hard.

May you hold your struggles in compassion. Anybody in this room not have struggles? Raise your hand. Okay, we've established that. Hold them with kindness, every one of you. And may your hearts be at peace—you and you and you and you. May your hearts be at peace. What a beautiful thing to wish.

Be at peace. Be happy. Wow—be happy. It's okay. And as Guillaume Apollinaire said, sometimes it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.

So we're going to take a pause for a moment of a different kind, and I want to ask you how that was. Any observations or reports or comments, just for a little bit before we take our break. How was that? Was it hard?

Pedagogically, the reason I started with other people is because most folks find it very hard to do loving-kindness for themselves. It feels squirmy, and "I don't deserve it" and all that kind of stuff comes up. So you picture people you care about, and then they look at you and say, "Yeah, you too—you get in the circle as well."

Someone in the back asked if I could explain a little further about having compassion for your struggles. What makes you ask?

"Sitting here listening to the meditation, my mind kept going, 'How do I have compassion for a struggle?' and I missed the next thing you were saying. I kind of got stuck on that, if I'm honest."

What are the kinds of things you struggle with? Is it family, or friends, or politics? Where's your struggle?

"I think it's all of the above."

All of the above. Okay, check box two, three, four. So one of the things about struggle—thank you for that, this is good—is that it's very easy to judge yourself. "I'm struggling with the conflicts in my family, or the political climate, or the way people are behaving at work." That's part of being human, that we find our way into struggle. There are different ways you can hold it. One is to judge yourself, or just get in it and be right. And then you notice how that works for you. When you live in that—you're shaking your head—like maybe that's not where you want to live.

So instead, you realize: okay, this is being human, to have struggle in family and community and close people and work. Let me be kind and compassionate. Everybody's having to deal with their human life, and they don't always do it very beautifully or graciously. Sometimes they make a mess of it, or they're hard for us. And instead of a lot of judgment, you say, "Ah, let me just hold this with kindness, compassion." That's a beginning of an answer. How does that land?

Someone else shared: "It's been fifty years, and I have to say I am just amazed—because fifty years ago I could not stand to do loving-kindness. I just hated it. It was incredibly, incredibly difficult."

Magnificent.

This is wonderful. You hated it. I love it. Keep going.

And I am just so amazed. It is the best loving-kindness practice I have ever had, and it's just completely different. So I just want to say: persist. I had to start out with my cat, because I could not stand to do it for anyone else. I certainly could not stand to do it for myself. But I could feel it from my cat. And it's just so different here, fifty years later. Little by little, it's changed. And I don't think I actually realized it until

tonight.

A testimonial. We love it. We are all your cats now, really. And it says something—that's why it's called practice rather than perfect.

I'm just so amazed and so grateful. I truly appreciate it.

Thank you. Thank you so much. And thank you both for these comments and questions, because they're important.

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