# The Peaceful Heart

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 47:16

I started with the practice of equanimity tonight, and I need to say a tiny bit more about it. The practice and understanding of equanimity is not to avoid conflict or to avoid change. Rather, it is finding a balance in the midst of it.

There's a famous chant in Pali, the ancient language like Sanskrit. The translation goes: "All things are impermanent. They rise and they pass away." That's the first two lines. The second part says: "Those who are at peace with this truth find true happiness." Those who are at peace with the fact that everything arises and passes away.

And that's the mystery of human incarnation—that death is stalking you, to use Don Juan's phrase from Carlos Castaneda. Everything that we knew, our childhood, what happened to it? It's back with the dinosaurs and the pyramids. Things arise for a time and then they just vanish. It's remarkable. And to be at peace with this brings true happiness.

I just turned 75 a few days ago. Trudy, my beloved wife, also just turned 75 a few weeks before that. We look at each other and say, "This is a big number." It got me reflecting, because I was fortunate enough to know four of my great-grandparents reasonably well, several of whom lived until I was in high school or college. They were mostly born in the 1880s or even the late 1870s, about a decade or so after the Civil War. They came on boats in the late 1800s to settle on the East Coast in Philadelphia. They told me stories of what it was like to live in Russia or Odessa or Turkey, where one of my great-grandparents and grandfather came from.

I remember my own grandfather, who was just a warm-hearted, loving human being. He loved his garden as much as anything, but he'd been in World War One. He would teach us the World War One songs—"Mademoiselle from Armentières," I'll stop with the first line—and other such bawdy soldier songs.

Then I realized: in this life, in 75 years, because it stretches both ways, it goes back to people I knew who were there almost in the Civil War. This is what we live. And it turns and it changes. On the other hand, I'm working with some friends in Silicon Valley who are part of the largest artificial intelligence project in the world. Here's my mother talking about people still lighting gas lamps on the street when she was a kid, and my grandparents' stories, and then here's AI. It changes, baby, all the time. And who we are—we are this change itself.

It gives us perspective. Like that famous Ojibwe saying I often quote: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." We're part of some mysterious dance

that's unfolding.

Now, part of the dance unfolding right now involves multiple crises. The health crisis with the pandemic and COVID is affecting so many of us—all of us, no one left out. Even though we're not all in the same boat, as it's been said: some are in yachts and some are in rowboats and some are clinging to a piece of driftwood, but it's still affecting us all. The health crisis, the economic crisis affecting so many in all kinds of difficult ways, the climate crisis, and underneath it all, the moral crisis reflected in Black Lives Matter and the movement for racial justice and economic justice. All these are happening at the same time. How do we practice in the midst of them all?

I think of the years I lived at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery on the edge of Thailand, near the border of Laos and Cambodia, in a province that bordered both countries. A friend came to visit after I'd been a monk there for a while. He was part of the Quakers International Group that had been sent to Vietnam and Laos during the war—just on the other side of the river from this province—to do peace work in the middle of the battles. I visited him and spent time in those countries.

He came and he complained. He said, "You all are just sitting on your butts and there's a war going on. You should be out there making a difference." I've been out protesting—I certainly have. I've protested most of my life in different ways. But here I was, a monk.

He said this to Ajahn Chah, and Ajahn Chah replied, "Just stay here a bit, and maybe you'll see something new. Because you know how to protest, and that's fine."

After some days, all the fight and angst and anger, the stress he carried from being in a war zone—even as a pacifist, or especially as a pacifist—began to slowly settle. He got quieter in some way.

And then Ajahn Chah looked at him and said, "You know, we can see the tentacles of the war from here" – because we were near an air base. Bombers and jets would fly overhead, soldiers coming through. He said, "There's always a war somewhere. But what is also needed is a place in the midst of it all where human beings can come and remember that there's another way to live – an island of peace and sanity."

In this monastery, these hundreds of acres of jungle and forest where the monks and nuns had been living for some years, you could drop your wallet with all your money and someone would pick it up, save it for you, and give it back. You could fall and be in difficulty, and people would rush to help you. The level of care and ethics and virtue and beauty that you felt – of a community living in harmony with respect for one another. Ajahn Chah said, "The world needs to be reminded of this, so that we do not forget." And he would say over and over, "Can you make your heart peaceful?"

Now, I've been out for almost every day for weeks and weeks, holding a big Black Lives Matter sign. It actually says "Time for Racial and Economic Justice – Black Lives Matter" on one of the busiest street corners, first in LA for some weeks and now for weeks here in the Bay Area. People come by and many will honk, give a thumbs up, wave. Some people scowl, thumbs down, shout bad things – "All lives matter!"

"What are you doing?" – all of that. And I'm just standing there, letting the traffic go by with my mask on, holding my sign.

I think of my dear friend Malidoma Somé, who is a West African shaman and medicine man and a remarkable teacher. He has a couple of PhDs from the Sorbonne and from an American university. But most importantly, he was truly raised as a shaman by the Dagara people in West Africa. After we had worked together for a number of years – retreats for kids coming out of street gangs, all kinds of inner city work, prison work, and things like that – he was called by his elders to go back and receive his elders' initiation.

There is a series of initiations among the Dagara people as you go through the stages of life. When he went back for the elders' initiation, he stripped down to a little loincloth. They gave him a calabash of water, took him to the center of the village, made an ash circle around him, and said, "You may not leave this ash circle for three days and three nights on the bare earth." Then they put an ash circle around his mouth and said, "You may not say anything for three days and three nights."

Once he sat there, they beat the village drum and announced, "Anyone in this village or the surrounding villages who has anything to say to this man – especially any difficulties, any complaints, any problems, anything you don't like that he's done – now is the time to get it out." And so people would come, and all he could do was sit there and let all the insults and all of the critique come and go. This was called the true training of an elder.

Can you understand this? Praise and blame. To be a wise person is to be able to hold all of this.

So equanimity, or balance of heart, is not passive. It is actually an attention to what's present.

I think of my friend Huston Smith, who was a very famous professor of religion. He wrote this great book on the religions of mankind. Huston Smith's granddaughter – it was all in the news one year – had been out on a sailboat in Tahiti with some other young people, and then she was murdered. He had this very deep soul connection with his granddaughter, this lovely, lovely being. And Huston, as you can imagine, was completely heartbroken.

People sent condolences. People brought him food – all the things one might do for someone who is grieving a great loss. He said the thing that helped him most was a young man who lived on the street a few houses away, a Native American. Huston said, "I would be sitting out on the porch, and this young man would come up over a number of days and take the chair next to me, and he would just sit with me, being silent." Huston said, "That presence for the deep hurt that I had, that caring presence – that was the most beautiful thing that anyone gave me in this time of sorrow."

So again, we're exploring: what is the peaceful heart?

The near enemy – the quality that masquerades as equanimity – is indifference. Indifference is a not

caring, a withdrawal. It's based on fear, a pulling away from the world. But true equanimity is being at peace in the midst of the mystery, becoming the witness to it – "the one who knows," as Ajahn Chah would say. The loving awareness, which is who you really are.

You are consciousness that was born into this body. And you get to witness the play of human incarnation. As you do so, you see the eight winds of praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain—changing all the time. Like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. These are the poetic words from the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra about this life. It appears and it disappears—praise and blame, gain and loss.

In the first lines of the Heart Sutra, it says form is not different than emptiness. Now what does that mean? It means that all these things that arise, that seem so substantial, dissolve and are replaced by the next breath, the next emotion, the next circumstance, the next sunrise or sunset. Nothing is substantial in itself. And who we are is the consciousness that witnesses this play of life.

Now I have a number of friends who've been sick, some of them very sick with coronavirus. I have friends, or people in my orbit, who've been arrested in demonstrations. Maybe worse than that, I have friends who are stuck at home with five kids and no childcare. They are working, they are suffering. There's boredom and restlessness and loss of money and fear and anxiety and vulnerability and alarm. How do we practice with this? How do we pause and breathe and let ourselves stay present with a sense of equanimity and vastness—a balance in the midst of change?

I will read you a passage from Margaret Wheatley—Meg Wheatley—who is an activist and a wise elder and a systems theorist. She writes about those who become warriors of the spirit, who carry the spirit in difficult times:

"Warriors for the human spirit are awake human beings who have chosen not to flee. They abide. They serve as beacons of an ancient story that tells of the goodness and generosity and creativity of humanity. You can identify them by their cheerfulness. You will know them by their compassion. When asked how they do it, they will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community."

The first quality she names is that they do not flee—they abide. They've chosen not to flee. As James Baldwin explains, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced. Whether it's the nature of the virus, economic injustice, racial injustice, or climate change, nothing can be responded to until we face it. This is really the beginning of what she's speaking about.

Then she says they serve as beacons of an ancient story of goodness and generosity. And that is who we are as a species, in spite of all the bad stuff you see on the news. You get the news of some shooting in this city and some looting there, or some war still happening someplace. What you don't get in the news is the one billion acts that hour during the newscast—parents putting scrambled eggs or oatmeal or rice gruel, whatever their national food is, on the table for their children, then cleaning the dishes, going out and

doing something for their neighbor, working together with others. Billions of acts of humanity and kindness. This is the ancient story of goodness and generosity in which those who are warriors for the human spirit participate.

They become what the Dalai Lama has been described as: a lamp in the darkness. They carry a spirit even when it seems dark. And it's not really dark—not fundamentally.

If you read and study the Buddhist teachings, the most fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths, you understand that suffering, which is the first noble truth—that life has suffering—is not saying that life is suffering. Life is magnificent, unbearably beautiful. And it has suffering. Anybody not have suffering? You can sign off now and I wish you well. Tell us how it is. But life has suffering. And yet that is only the first noble truth. It's not the end of the story.

There are causes for suffering among humanity: greed, hatred, ignorance, fear, prejudice. Societies based on greed and fostering hatred will suffer. Lives based on this will bring suffering. But that's only the second noble truth.

The third truth is that there is peace—that peace is possible. And the fourth: that there's a path. There are practices of compassion and mindful, loving awareness, of living with integrity, of quieting the mind and opening the heart, that allow you to live in this ever-changing world with an inner freedom that no one can take from you.

I think of my new friend and colleague Valerie Kaur—we've done a bit of teaching together—who is a wonderful activist and filmmaker, Sikh, and a lawyer. She says the darkness we experience now can be seen culturally and globally, all the problems I've described, as the darkness of a tomb. But if we turn our attention—

In another way, we can see it as the darkness of the womb. Then, in fact, we are in a birth process. And anybody who's given birth or even attended a birth, as I have—because I certainly haven't given birth in this incarnation—knows that birth is not that easy. It's messy. Sometimes it's bloody. It's painful. It goes on a lot longer than you thought it would. It's dangerous in different ways. And there are contractions that come and then they pause and then they're peaceful. And then a huge new contraction comes. It's this amazing process, that the body becomes a channel for new beings to come into this planet. It's extraordinary.

And what if we are in a birth process collectively? Valerie asks, and I pose it to you. What if in fact it's not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of a womb of new birth? What if we hold it that way and work toward it?

Those who carry the spirit are beacons who remind people that suffering is not the end of the story—that in fact we've lived through pandemics and earthquakes and typhoons and all kinds of things, world wars and battles, and something in us knows how to be reborn, how to survive the difficulties. It's in your DNA.

Your ancestors are cheering for you, saying, "Go, baby! You know how to do this. We did it before you, and now it's your time." The story is that suffering is not the end of the story, but human magnificence and care for one another and the possibility of a new birth.

And then she says something really remarkable: You can identify them by their cheerfulness. Now that's something to say in a time when there's so much hurt and pain in the world. And it's not to deny any of it, but here's the instruction from the Buddha: "Live in joy and love forever, even among those who hate. Live in joy in health, even among the sick and afflicted. Live in joy in peace, even among the troubled. Look within, quiet the mind and heart, be still and free from fear and attachment. Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

These are instructions for the time of illness, the time of conflict, the time of difficulty—to find a joy in yourself in the midst of it all.

I remember when I first met Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and was reading his books. He's so remarkable. And he would talk about how when you sit and practice, you should put a half smile on your lips—that little half smile of the Buddha. You should smile. And I have to say, at first I thought it was like putting one of those yellow smiley faces on top of suffering. Come on, don't you have anything deeper than that? In fact, he's a very deep guy, but it's like, smile, smile. I asked him about it once and he said, "I've seen so much suffering. I have to teach joy. I have to teach joy."

And I think about John Lewis, who just died, as we all know, and all the things that have been said about him—that he was a kind and gentle human being, a humble servant who looked out for all of humankind. These are the things that the people who were closest to him are saying about him, that he had a deep faith in the central and essential goodness of humanity, in spite of all the suffering he'd seen. And so he was a gentleman and a gracious human being and a carrier of joy.

I heard a story today, actually. In the last decade or so, he'd helped create a graphic novel, a comic book series called *March*, which was all about the Selma March and civil rights in the sixties that he was so much a part of with Dr. King. And the person who helped him create that took him to Comic-Con, which is the giant convention of all the comic book enthusiasts from around the world. He gave a talk, holding up *March* and so forth. And then he put on a trench coat and a backpack. And he said, "In my backpack is an apple, a toothbrush, and the two books that I carried on my march. This is what I had with me." And he said, "Let me show you." And he went down from the stage and he began to walk. And the young people who were there got up and started following him. And pretty soon there were a thousand young people following him as he marched out and around the convention center, as if he was saying to them, "You can do this." As if he was passing on something that had cheer and joy and creativity, even in the midst of the difficulty.

You can identify them by their cheerfulness.

You will know them by their compassion.

The demonstrations that have been happening, not just around the country but around the world—highlighting the terrible injustice, the woven-in racism, the suffering in all these different ways—have been ninety-five or ninety-nine percent peaceful. And yes, there's been a bit of rioting. I myself am not a stranger to that from my earlier activist days, I have to say. And if you're a young man, basically you say, "Is there anything dangerous to do around here? Where can I sign up for it?" So there's that in the spirit of it.

Martin Luther King said, "Rioting is the language of the unheard." Or the African proverb that so speaks to what's happened in that part, that little part: "If a child is not cared for by the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth." If a child is rejected by the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth.

There's this longing in us as human beings to feel valued, to feel seen, to feel connected to one another. And if that's denied because you're born and your skin is a certain color or you're born in a certain circumstance, that longing doesn't go away. It still has to find its voice. And now Black bodies, brown bodies, BIPOC bodies, nations are being presented with the bill of what has been ignored, for all the suffering. And it's time to settle up for all that's happened.

Some years ago, I was invited to San Quentin Prison for a graduation from the GRIP program. This was run by Jacques Verduin, a dear friend who had started, with the help of Spirit Rock, the Insight Prison Project. It's now morphed in different ways over the last twenty years or more. I was part of the board, president of the board for a while, and certainly helped in its genesis. Now it's spread through many prisons doing fantastic work.

But this was a graduation, and I was to be one of the speakers. So I went in, and there was the biggest hall in San Quentin. At one end were one hundred twenty men wearing mortarboards and graduation gowns, like a college or high school graduation. At the other end of the room were three hundred visitors, which included people from the governor's office, from the corrections department, local mayors, various people involved with prison work, social workers, friends, family.

The men had chosen a valedictorian to speak of their program. The GRIP program—Guiding Rage Into Power—had anger management, mindfulness practice, yoga, restorative justice training, and forgiveness, all these kinds of things. It really turned these men's lives around. So they appointed their valedictorian, who gave a beautiful little talk, and then said, "We have things that we need to say to you."

And they all stood up.

First they read a pledge that they had been violent men, and they pledged—now that they had learned—that they would never again use violence to solve a conflict or a situation or difficulty in the world. They offered this pledge. And then, following that, they made a deep apology to all the suffering they'd caused, to all the people, the families, the community, those who had suffered in some way from

their acts, the families of others, even their own families, and everyone in the room.

Then I was asked to give a little talk, which I did, about beginning again—that it's never too late to start over and begin again, beginner's mind, the birth of a new life.

And then my good friend and compadre Luis Rodriguez, who is a great Latino poet, was supposed to read a poem. Luis and I have done a lot of work together over the years in prisons and with kids and gangs and all kinds of other settings. He's an extraordinary poet. He was the poet laureate of Los Angeles for a couple of years in a row, and an activist. His poems, because he himself had been a heroin addict, had been on the street and homeless, in and out of working in prisons—he really speaks from a place where there's blood and guts in his poems. They're very real.

I thought, "All right, he's going to read something powerful."

He got up and said, "I can't read my poem."

We all paused.

He said, "I can't read it because all you men apologized to us, but it's we who need to apologize to you. Most of you were born in communities of poverty, of drug use, held and surrounded in the field of racism and disrespect for who you are. You were children brought up in communities where there wasn't economic opportunity and work and decent education. We failed you. It's we who need to offer you an apology."

When he finished saying that, the room got silent. No one could speak because they knew he was telling another piece of the truth that needed to be voiced.

This is really the heart of compassion—that can look and see those who've suffered, and also those who are causing suffering out of their ignorance, all of them, and hold them in the great heart of compassion.

You can identify them by their cheerfulness. You can know them by their compassion.

When asked how they do it, they will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community.

Discipline. For almost everyone in this COVID time, one of the most important things to learn is a kind of routine for your life. It gets chaotic if you don't have a routine. How do you make a schedule that takes time for silence, for yourself, for meditation?

I've been doing all kinds of teaching, but I was working with groups of first responders, including my daughter's organization, Oasis Legal Services, which gets asylum for people whose lives are in danger from around the world. They're often the first people that these folks seeking asylum will ever have told their whole story to. About what it's like to be a gay man in Uganda, knowing that if anyone finds out, you're likely to be stoned to death. Or to be a lesbian coming from Guatemala where you've been raped by family members to "fix" you—one story after another. Or a transgender person who came from Saudi

Arabia, if you can imagine that.

In working with the staff, because there's all the secondary trauma as well, I said, "You need backup. I don't know what you believe in, but in every one of your offices, you should make a little altar. Maybe you put Guadalupe or Maria. Maybe you put Buddha or Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion. Maybe you put Kali because you need her fierceness. I don't know, but it's not for you to hold in your bodies. You need to go in and light a candle and say, 'All right, Kali. All right, Guadalupe. All right, Mother Mary. I'll do your work. But you have to carry this. It's not my job to carry it.'"

And make rituals. Wash your hands and face between each client. Do a scan through your body. I'm talking about this for first responders, but it's really all of us in some way. We're now on the front lines of what's happening in the world, protected though you may be. You need to find your own discipline and your own routine and your own steadiness and your own practices in the midst of it all.

Then she says, they will tell you about discipline and dedication. Dedication is the bodhisattva vows. Amidst the suffering of the world, may I be a lamp in the darkness, food for the hungry, medicine for the sick, a resting place for the weary. "May I do this as long as beings exist," chants the Dalai Lama, "so that my life and all lives come together to alleviate the sufferings of the world and bring everyone into peace."

This is a really uncertain time. We are in a great birth process that we can hope gives something new to the world, that some birth happens that we get to be a part of. For those of you who've been around a birth, there are times to breathe—remember that instruction, breathe. There are times to push; that's part of the dedication, but not always. And there are times just to step back and feel the mystery of life coming through you, the life of this universe coming through you in this mystery.

As Thomas Merton taught a young activist, do not depend on the hope of results—because what's true for us is that we can do all that we can, but we don't get to choose the results. As you see this more and more deeply, as you plant seeds of goodness, as you care for the world, more and more you realize that it's not in your hands. You focus on the truth and the value and the rightness of the work itself. You're dedicated to plant seeds of goodness, to care for things in the world.

And if you're someone with privilege—which is a lot of us listening to this talk, because I'm talking to myself all these days as well—it's not about guilt or shame. There's another way to see it. It is your assignment. You've been given the cosmic assignment to have privilege and then to use it, to set your intention and say, "How can I use this privilege in a way that makes the world a more beautiful place?" And by beautiful, I mean in every way—a just place and a caring place.

They will tell you about discipline, dedication, and the necessity of community. Community is the only way. Together, we are attending the birth of something new, messy though it may be. When you go into hospitals—hopefully you don't have to, but sometimes it happens—the doctor who comes down the ward, whoever she or he is, is called the attending. The attending physician. The attending.

This is your job. You have the assignment with your privilege, wherever you are, and you now have become the attending one to the new birth of the world. And you want to do it with love and a peaceful heart, because the world doesn't need more hate, and it doesn't need more fear, and it doesn't need more ignorance and confusion.

You are loving awareness. This is your true nature. This is what was born into you.

You are consciousness. You are loving awareness manifesting through this really bizarre experiment that the cosmos has decided to make you. In all the galaxies of the universe, there's never been quite something as unique and strange as you. And now the cosmos is saying, "All right, let's do something interesting with this." You are the cosmos born in this way. You are loving awareness, the consciousness that is who you are, that was born into your body.

Thich Nhat Hanh was brought here to San Francisco a couple of years ago after he suffered a major stroke. At that time, he was 89 or 90. He was in France at Plum Village and for a while in the French hospitals, getting good care. But then a friend in Silicon Valley who is very much a student of Thich Nhat Hanh flew him and a whole group of his monks and nuns here so that they could receive top medical care from UC and Stanford. And there he was, living in San Francisco in a place set up by Mark Benioff from Salesforce—I will use his name, wonderful friend.

In the mornings, Thich Nhat Hanh would be rolled in in a wheelchair. He couldn't speak and he could just barely move one arm, and he'd been in considerable pain. But they set up one of the rooms where they were all staying as a zendo, as a meditation hall. He would be wheeled in and the bell would be struck and we would all sit for forty minutes and Thich Nhat Hanh would be there. Then they would ring the bell at the end.

The last morning before he went back to France—he'd been here in the Bay Area for six months or more for treatment—Trudy and I went to sit with him and join that group. When the bell was struck at the end of the sitting, he deliberately looked around and gazed at the eyes of everyone there. He looked at me, and I've known him for years. He looked at others.

Trudy is the one that noticed this. She said to me, "Do you remember, did you look at his eyes?" Because she said—and I could see it—one eye was tremendously present, like he was acknowledging each person that was there. This beautiful sense of mindful, loving presence. She said, "One eye was here, fully present, and one eye was on eternity." And you could see it, as if he was holding both. Here he was, ninety years old with a stroke. He knew the dance of birth and death. He'd seen it his whole life. One eye on eternity and one eye completely present where we are.

Then we went into the kitchen afterward. He was taken back by his caregivers. I was sitting with Sister Chân Không, who is the female counterpart and leader in his community for years and years. We were talking about how there was a big retreat happening down at Deer Park in Southern California that very

week. I said, "Well, because Thich Nhat Hanh had this terrible stroke and won't be there, are people coming anyway?" She said, "Oh yes, six hundred people are arriving today." Then she paused and she said, "He taught us that we are him and he is us. That the community itself is really the carrier of the Dharma." He said that in other ways when he said the next Buddha to come in this world, the next Buddha is the Sangha. He taught us that we are him and he is us.

So as I finish, I'd like you to imagine—maybe you can even lift your hands up for a moment on either side of your body—and imagine that you're holding hands with all the other people who are listening tonight. There are a thousand or two thousand or ten thousand, however many, it's quite a few actually. And we're all in the circle holding hands together. You're the ones that abide, that have chosen not to flee, known by your goodness and generosity, discipline and dedication. Feel the necessity of community, feel that we carry each other in our hearts and in our beings.

And maybe the only question to ask is: What would love have me do today? What would love have me do with all of you together? What would love have us do together?

With this, I thank you for listening.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*