Q and A: The Peaceful Heart | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 30:32

For those who want to stay a little longer, we have maybe fifteen minutes or so for questions or dialogue.

"Jack, what can I do during this time to help or be of service—to the world or to anybody? I feel like I'm just in this shelter, locked up by myself, not doing any good for anyone. Why am I even here? I'm wondering if you can suggest what path I might take to be of some help."

You know, there's a difference between being an older and an elder. An elder is actually the role that you inhabit to be there for others. And I hear that beautifully in your question. You want to do something meaningful—not just be old, but actually inhabit that role of elder.

So let me ask you: what do you care about?

"I care about justice. I care about trying to alleviate suffering in the world, however I can do that. Just to be of service, to somehow be important in accomplishing something along those lines—helping people."

Beautiful. So what I'm going to suggest, since you do need to protect yourself and stay sequestered—and since you're online with me, you obviously know how to do this—is that you go online to certain organizations. You could go to vote.org, which is trying to get out the vote across the country. They will give you ways to send messages or texts or emails to people. You could go to Southern Poverty Law Center, which has been fighting for justice for years, and say, "I want to volunteer. How can I help?" Go to Amnesty International or the ACLU or whatever is close to your heart and say, "I want to volunteer. I want to use my time." And even if you get turned down in two or three places, sooner or later somebody is going to say, "Yes, we have just something for you to do."

"What's alive for me right now is this idea of birth—having given birth and having these really intense images coming. As we are rebirthing or birthing this new world and holding hands with the ten thousand warriors of light that might be plugged into this process, I'm struggling with: what if the midwife is indifference? What about those gatekeepers who say, 'Get out of this laboring room, let's C-section this baby because we're in a hurry, there's an economy to open'? The indifference of those who hold power—perhaps forcing this baby to be born in ways that might be stillborn."

First, I just want to feel into your question. You're concerned—really concerned—because there are things happening from the government or people of power that are destructive, that are undermining what good could come of these crises. We could talk about all the ways that's true. And I feel the concern and the caring underneath.

But I just need to remind you of something: it's women who give birth, and nothing can stop them. Just feel that. It doesn't matter if there are people in power—women know how to do it. Nothing stops that. And I want you to feel and own that there is something in you in spite of all this.

As I said, we've gone through this for centuries and millennia—bad leadership and epidemics and tragedies. And it's women more than men who have kept it all together, who give birth to the new. So I'm not worried about the power when I look into the eyes of the women of this world. There's something else that's here. And I really trust that power.

"Yeah, I'll keep practicing. The fear is very alive, for sure."

The fear is under there.

As I've witnessed, babies often don't get born because of interruptions and external interventions. And this is a big baby—we're all in it. But the women know how to do it.

"Hi, Jack. Like many of us, I'm feeling a lot of anger and frustration at what little progress we've made as a race, as a human race. I, like many others probably on this call, was in Washington DC fifty years ago and thought perhaps we wouldn't have to do it again. And now I'm not sure we've made much progress. I'd like to look back on 2020 and not say, 'What did I miss?' but rather, 'What did I accomplish? What was I able to do?' You bring up a good point about creating a broader awareness. Racial injustice is what's really getting to me these days, and I'd like to reach out and try to do something about it by bringing that broader awareness, by being one of your warriors. Now, I'm an early practitioner, and a lot of my friends and family are back in Michigan, where they're all early practitioners too. What might be a short list I can remember and bring to my friends and family—something that helps relate this message of how the Dharma can help us with our white privilege and how that might affect solving some of this injustice?"

Thank you for the question because it's so to the point of what's happening now. When I go back to your first sentence or two, you said you were angry. And when you feel that anger, what's underneath it?

"Mostly what little progress we've made, and what I've been able to do along the way as well."

So I want to point to something else that might be there. Yes, the anger is there because we've made too little progress. But I would say the anger is also there because you care. That anger wouldn't be there if it didn't matter to you. There's a kind of passion in you, a fire, a caring that's actually very deep. The anger is as big as it is because it matters that much to you.

I don't have a simple answer for what the ideal practice is. In some way, you have to listen inside. I think

of my colleague, teacher, and friend Maha Ghosananda, the Gandhi of Cambodia that I talk about frequently, whose all nineteen members of his family were murdered. He led those peace walks through Cambodia, chanting, "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed."

For some people, it's a practice of compassion and loving-kindness that you undertake so that every human being you see, you offer them a blessing. For others, it's something very active as well. You say, "I'm going to work on getting out the vote." Personally, I am doing that. We have a project to mobilize all the Dharma communities and all the yoga practitioners and teachers around the country—yoga teachers and Buddhist meditators helping get out the vote, not just your own vote, but helping others vote too.

So find an inner practice that nourishes you and strengthens you. There is a book I wrote—it's not really about social justice, more in the flavor of what we did this evening about a peaceful heart. It's called *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. There are some practices or passages in there that may be helpful.

In terms of your family and friends in Michigan, I think the big thing is if you express your care, even more than your anger. If you say, "Not only do I care, but here's what I'm doing." People learn in resonance with one another, and if they feel like, "Hey, Dan is really doing something—I want to be part of that," your doing will bring them together with you more than anything you could say to them.

So I thank you for your care, because underneath everything you said is a big heart. And now it's time to put it out there.

"Hi, Jack. Thank you so much for the teaching tonight. That was really beautiful. The peaceful heart really resonated. I'm very aware of this feeling of not doing enough right now. And I am someone who's very grateful that I am still working full time. I work in healthcare as a mental health provider, even seeing some people individually right now."

What you're doing is important—it's really needed right now.

"Yes. My question is—"

It's been partly really addressed when you were talking to the first responders—this question of how to hold the suffering of others when you're simultaneously feeling pretty stressed out yourself, as the acuity is just up for all of us right now.

What have you learned that helps you so far?

Sleep. Being in nature. Talking to people. And knowing that when I am with people, I am present.

Well, you've answered most of your own question. Sleep more, walk in nature, talk with people. And maybe some of those things that I mentioned for the first responders apply here too. Perhaps it's time to make your altar so that you don't carry it all in your body. Sweep through your body at the end of the day.

Give it back to Mother Earth, or give it to Kuan Yin to carry. Do those things that nurture you.

You already know how to do this. You're in a tough birth process. Like a lot of people, as a first responder, you're right at the side of this birth happening. And so you do have to take care of yourself.

There's a famous story called the Bamboo Acrobats. It describes a traveling mini-circus that came through the villages. There was a father and a daughter—she would climb up a pole and do tricks while he carried this long bamboo pole. They had a disagreement and brought it to the Buddha. The father said, "I'll take care of you if you take care of me." And the daughter said, "No, no—I should take care of myself and you take care of yourself."

They went to the Buddha and asked, "Who's right?" He listened to them and said, "I hate to say it to you, dad, but actually your daughter is right—as is often the case." He explained that if she takes care of herself, she will also be protecting him. And if he takes care of himself, he will be protecting his daughter as well.

So there's something in what you say. You already know this—the nature, the sleep, the taking time. Maybe now you're adding some rituals and practices. Just know that you happen to be present at a time of messy birth, and you have to keep yourself properly cared for so that you can do this work well. And I thank you for that.

So my question is, how does white awakening work relate to or intersect with the Buddhist teachings?

What makes you ask?

The reason I'm asking is that I've heard a surprising number of harsh, unkind, and flat-out rude replies when I speak about doing white awakening classes or programs. And they were so profound for me personally. So it's interesting to take in that energy that comes, that feels very negative.

What do you do with that when people disparage it or are so negative?

Well, I notice my body, of course—almost instantly sort of like, wow. It makes me feel sad. And I feel an energy that arises, really wanting to convince them that they should take another look. I realize there's a passionate fire in that work, and it's been profound in my practice.

First, I'm just listening to you with a lot of respect for doing the work that you're describing, because it's the work that we all need to do. The Buddhist teachings primarily talk about the inherent dignity of every human being. The Buddha was very clear about this—in the racist caste system of India, he welcomed everybody to come and be respected, quite against the entire social structure of the time. There are teachings upon teachings about the value of every human being and treating each one with dignity. So you're doing that in this beautiful way.

And then what happens is this: as you wake up, you realize more and more clearly—in ways you may not have seen before—that society is so structured in ways that people are not only ignorant, but because of that ignorance, they're causing all kinds of suffering. And they don't even believe it or know it. It's woven in. You see all of that. And then when they say things like "Oh, that's a bad thing" or other negative dismissals, you feel it in your body. You feel sad. You feel it in your body.

Part of what happens in doing this work is that you enter the territory of suffering. You voluntarily do it and say, "All right, I'm going to open my heart and my mind to actually recognize and feel what oppression is like." I mean, what happens? You can walk down certain streets or in stores or go places and you can trust that you'll be accepted. But if you were brown or black or poor—a person of color from whatever background—you'd be seen with suspicion, or worse. You'd be tailed or pulled over or whatever. You know all this in some way.

So you begin to see the fabric of society and the suffering woven through it. But it's not enough to see it. If you're really engaged in some way, you also feel it. You can't not, because you're a human being. And then when you get dismissed by others for it, what you're experiencing is the pain that people have experienced for a really long time—every Black or brown or BIPOC person who spoke up and said something, every woman who spoke up and said something happened and people dismissed it or got angry. You're now party to that pain, and you can't really fix it.

But what you can do is see the fear that's behind it. Because all that reactivity, all the grasping, all the aggression—if you look underneath it, there's fear. And knowing that, you can hold them with some compassion, even in their ignorance. You're not going to convince them with your words at all, but you'll convince them with your love. When you simply say, "I feel like I need to do this work because it's a work of love for me. It's a work of learning to love more fully. That's what I'm doing." How does that sound?

Another person asked about inclusion and invitation: How do we get the broader community involved in the dharma community? How do we become more inclusive of people of color, of those over 65, of the queer community? As a Latina lesbian, she was asking how leaders—both small and large—can become more inclusive.

First of all, I really appreciate both the genuineness of your question and your concern, your care. And also the fact that as a Latina and lesbian, you know what needs to happen in some way.

I'll tell you something. In the early 1990s—almost thirty years ago now—I taught my first day-long retreat for people of color in Oakland at Reverend E's Church, which was a Black church in Oakland, also a spiritualist church. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to bring teachings of loving-kindness, compassion, mindful self-awareness, how to steady the heart, to people in a community where there's been so much targeting by racism and injustice and poverty. Maybe this will be of value to them." That was my thought.

I was wrong.

In that room were fifty or sixty people, primarily Black and Latino, perhaps a few Asian Americans as well. Instead of all these beginners I thought I was going to introduce to the Dharma, it turned out almost all of them had long-term practices. They had been practicing yoga and meditation for years. And they said, "You know, I just don't go to those white centers. It doesn't feel comfortable for me. But actually, I've been doing this a long time." One man stood up and said, "I'm the only Black vegetarian Buddhist doctor that I know. And I feel like I've found my people."

So the first thing to say is that it's already there—in the LGBT community, in the Latino community, in the Black community. There are very deep spiritual traditions already part of those communities. And there's also tremendous interest in the inner life, expressed in different ways. This reframes things considerably. It doesn't have to be brought to these communities; rather, we want to celebrate what's already there and add to it, support it, make it more accessible.

The second thing I'd say, quite personally to you: if you have a group, it sounds like you're already teaching in some way. Put it out there, baby. Invite people and let it grow. I'm just thrilled that you're doing it. You have to find your own language and your own way that fits into the community you tend to.

I'll tell one more story. I was doing some peace work in Palestine and Israel, and I did a large benefit in Tel Aviv for mindfulness in Arabic. About a thousand people came, and we raised a good amount of money. I was talking to one of the first Arabic mindfulness teachers working in Palestine and Syria, and I said, "It's so beautiful—you're leading little retreats. It's almost like people can go out into the desert." I was thinking of forty days in the desert where you fast and receive visions. I said, "You can invite people to go out, like tradition has it, to listen in the wilderness and receive inspiration. That might be a beautiful fit for the culture."

She said, "No, no, no. That doesn't work at all. Going out into the desert alone—for people here, that's a punishment."

I asked, "Well, if that's not the right image, what is?"

She said, "The image is a walled garden—maybe a little oasis with a wall around it, fruit trees, flowing water. There's an inner walled garden you can enter that contains the fruits of the heart." And that was what she used in her teaching.

I tell this story partly in honor of the fact that you are translating these teachings into the community of people you know and love—the Latina community, the LGBT community. You will find the metaphor that brings a sweetness they already recognize. They'll say, "Oh yes, I know this." And you'll offer ways that help. I'm part of your cheering section. Thank you, Maria.

We need to take our pause now and just take a breath. I want to thank you all for the sincerity of your

questions. In them, you could feel how much people care. People's voices revealed their longing to attend, to help, to serve, to be together in whatever ways we can. We feel it all the more acutely because we are isolated—but we're not completely isolated. We're not isolated in spirit, and we're not isolated because there are things we can do. As long as you have breath and goodwill and a good heart, there are beautiful things you can do.

So let's be quiet for just thirty seconds.

Trust your own caring heart. Trust the ancient story that tells of the goodness, the generosity, and the creativity of humanity—that it lives within you. The longing to make a difference in your life and the lives of others is real. And you will find your way.

Thank you.

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