Q and A: Wonder, Mystery, Awe, Gratitude | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 28:47

Trust your good hearts, you know. It doesn't take very long, just a minute or two to get quiet and listen. And when you do, it's called a sobat. The Sufis call it a dialogue with the heart. When you ask, the heart will answer.

I think now we will shift to do a little bit of dialogue with a few people who have questions—and hopefully they also have answers. Let's find out.

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*Question:** I was hoping you might talk about equanimity. Too often I feel like a leaf in the wind. Someone praises me, likes what I've done, and I feel buoyed and happy. Someone else argues with me or criticizes me, and my mood goes down. I think with sitting, I'm becoming more aware that this happens, but I don't feel stability. I still feel like I'm being pushed here and there. I just wondered if you had thoughts about that.

*Jack Kornfield:** Let's do a tiny bit of practice together, because it's such an important question, and you've articulated it so well. Already you're becoming quite mindful of it.

So if you're kind enough, let your eyes close and remember a time—let's go for blame because that's the tough one—when somebody criticized, judged, or blamed you. Let one pop up on the screen inside. You don't have to tell the content, but just remember it. Tell me when you have a scene.

*Student:** I do.

*Jack Kornfield:** Okay. And now notice: the blame arises, the judgment arises, and then you have a reaction. So notice what the reaction is without judging it.

*Student:** I think the reaction is being defensive, protecting myself, explaining to myself why I'm right.

*Jack Kornfield:** So feel that. Feel the defensiveness, the protection, and the contraction. If it had a center in your body, where would it be? Someplace most central to it.

*Student:** Probably my stomach.

*Jack Kornfield:** So feel that place in your stomach. What's it like? Tight, hot, cold, throttling?

*Student:** Tight, a bit uncomfortable.

*Jack Kornfield:** So feel its tight and uncomfortable place. You've been attacked, it feels like, and now you're tight and defending yourself and trying to make yourself right.

One more question: How long ago did you learn to tighten up and contract and defend yourself? When did you first learn it? How old were you?

*Student:** Oh, gosh.

*Jack Kornfield:** Pick a number.

*Student:** Elementary school.

*Jack Kornfield:** Yeah. Before that.

*Student:** Yeah, five years old, something like that.

*Jack Kornfield:** So see this little five-year-old Greg, and somebody's criticizing him, and he doesn't know any better. He thinks there's something wrong with him, and he has to protect himself from that. Protect. Defend.

So if you could put him in your lap now and hold him and say, you know—this is the way incarnation is.

Some people like and some people don't. They judge and they bless and they praise and they blame. And we'll get through this, okay? Let me just hold you a little bit. See how he likes that.

Yeah, I think he likes that.

And now notice that you actually have become the witness to this whole drama—to the child who's been trying to defend himself, and to the adult who remembers and feels it in his stomach. And feel that witnessing like the space in the room. You're actually the vast space of awareness, of loving awareness, mindful loving awareness, that's noticing all this.

You've done it beautifully. And the fact that you can notice it means that it's not who you are. It's part of the drama. And the point of equanimity is not to have the reactions come—they're just reactions. You can bow to them and say, "Oh, yeah, here you are, pain. Here you are, fear. Here you are, defending yourself." Then you can feel that child, though frightened about the world, with compassion. And then you can be like those images from Polonaruwa. You see it all, rejecting none of it, through the great heart of compassion.

How are you doing?

Good. Thank you.

Thank you for that. That was very helpful. I mean, it's not an easy thing to do it in front of lots of people. There was a lot of courage to do that. I appreciate it. And it's not your question—it's our question. All these people are hanging on the screen saying, "Okay, how about me too?" Because the point of equanimity is not to stop the dance, but to come to that stillness and spaciousness that says, "Oh, yeah. This is part of being human. It's okay." And not actually get caught, not believe it so much. You did it beautifully. Thank you.

"Hi, Jack. Can you hear me? It's Arisika."

Oh, hello. I love you, Arisika, my dear friend of so long.

"So I have a question. I think I got this great gift in that on November 1st, right before the election and right before my birthday, my husband fell and fractured a vertebra. Had to be taken out in a sling, down the stairs. And he's been recovering, but it's slow. There are periods when he's in pain, and so I hear this moaning and groaning, and it really takes me back to the twenty years I was a midwife. I feel so connected to all the people all over the world who are caring for loved ones. And I feel this paradoxical, immense gratitude that I can drive to—there is a pharmacy, I can drive there in five minutes, we can get all this paraphernalia, there's running water, there's a washing machine, you know..."

So all this gratitude, and at the same time just such openness of the heart. For the first couple of days, I actually occasionally had pain in the parts of my body where he was hurting. Part of the question is this issue about the differences or boundaries between loving-kindness and equanimity. I'm realizing that I haven't felt this raw and this connected to suffering. I know about the suffering—certainly there's been all the suffering around Black Lives Matter and all these murdered black people and all of that. But this... I mean, we didn't even pay much attention to the election because we were so busy just caring for one another. And so there's some question: if I don't feel this raw, if the heart isn't opening like this with something coming out—is it only when I'm so close to suffering that I can feel it? I just noticed how different it is. I'm not being very coherent, but do you have any thoughts?

First of all, I'm just really touched by what you say, because we've known each other for a long time. And I do know you've lived through a great deal—the sufferings, whether in the family or community, or being a black woman in a racist culture, all of these things, and your work as a midwife and teacher. My experience of you is that you are actually beautiful and perfect exactly as you are. I hate to say this to you.

And with that, I also know that the heart has its seasons. Just as the body breathes—you know this—and the cerebrospinal fluid pulses, and the menstrual cycles move with the moon and the tides, so too does the connecting heart, which is what you're talking about. It opens and closes. Sometimes we want it open, but you can't always live that way. And this is okay enough. We need to come back and just be peaceful for a

bit. It's just too much to carry. Sometimes it feels deeply connected, and then sometimes that passes. Because everything is impermanent, that's impermanent too.

What I hear you describing—and I could bow to it—is the deep, intimate, tender connection that comes in that kind of love that you have in your marriage and with the people you care about. Sometimes it's very raw. Sometimes it's raw because it's the world and you feel it. And then sometimes you take a breath and you realize, wow, that was a time of being really raw. It's not like one of them is right and another isn't. The space of loving awareness, of mindfulness, holds all of that and says, yes, this is our human life. And I see you doing it really damn well.

How does that sound to you?

Thank you, Jack.

It's a pleasure. And is he getting better?

Yes, he's getting better. It's just slow. His body—he's eighty, so...

Yeah, you're older, it takes its time. I'm only seventy-five, but I can relate. Thank you.

The next person who appeared spoke: Hi, Jack. This is Seema.

Hi, Seema.

I am thrilled to be in your presence. I'm one of your students in the MMTCP program.

Oh, wonderful.

I have been thanking the pain that I have experienced in life. What I'm noticing is that the forgiveness I had when I was twenty-eight, when my father was shot in the middle of the street back home in Iran—I forgave the person who killed my father. And then right after that, my daughter had PTSD because of the war between Iran and Iraq. I remember that I came to you one day at Spirit Rock and I asked you, "How can I forgive Ahmadinejad?" And you told me, "Just like you and I, he had a mom who cared for him."

But as we go on, I realized that forgiving someone who has done something away from me and my family is actually harder. I find it much harder to forgive someone who is keeping children in cages or doing something to people who are not related to me. I just wanted to see if you have something that can help me.

This is not just your question—it's really a question for a lot of us. There is so much pain that we create. We could call it tragic, because we know better as human beings, and yet some of us are doing things that

bring grievous pain to children, to vulnerable people. And it is heartbreaking.

So first, let me just acknowledge what you're describing: some of the great sufferings of the world that you see, and in particular, those who are causing that suffering.

I'm not even sure forgiveness is the right practice for that. Who are we to judge them or forgive them? What we see is that they're creating suffering, and it may inspire us to do what we can to prevent that from continuing—to stand up in whatever ways we can for justice, to stop it in all the ways available to us.

I think there's a place for compassion here. It's a very different channel than forgiveness.

I think about the Dalai Lama speaking of the Chinese military, who not only took over Tibet but burned the sacred monasteries and texts, killed so many monks and nuns, imprisoned them. And he calls them "my friends, the enemy." It's interesting he uses that word. He doesn't just say "my friends." He says, "my friends, the enemy—those who are trying to destroy us."

When he speaks, he speaks about seeing with the eyes of compassion. He says even they, just as we talked about, even they had moms. Even they have their reasons, even if those reasons are twisted and hateful and ignorant, based on so many falsehoods and greed and so forth. He gazes with the eyes of compassion and says, "Yes, they too suffer. They cause suffering, and they will suffer."

There's a way in which I don't want to answer your question because I don't think it's fair. It's too deep a question to just give a verbal answer to.

I think of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was in the gulags in Siberia, tortured at times. He said, "It would be so easy if we could blame someone over there—the evil ones—and only get them out of the world, and then everything would be fine. But the line dividing good and evil also cuts through our own hearts. And how can we get rid of a part of our heart?"

So I don't have a simple answer for you. I think forgiveness may be the wrong frame, and that actually it's just compassion for so much suffering.

Doesn't forgiveness start with compassion?

It does. And it might come to that, and it might not. But I wouldn't even aim for that. If you can live with compassion, that already is actually quite magnificent.

How does that feel to you as we talk? Does it feel like it's skipping over the problem?

You said, when does the trust start?

Well, part of the trust is also knowing what's true. You can trust someone who is doing terrible things to continue to do terrible things. It doesn't mean you trust them to be something other than that. You can trust your own perceptions: "Oh, this person is so caught in their hate that what I trust is what I see, and

that's what's there."

I think you need to really trust that you see with some clarity. And then you trust: What can I do? What am I able to do in this world that reduces suffering, that protects those as best I can?

I think the same wisdom or teachings that have helped me not to be destroyed, and to be a mindfulness teacher myself in the future, is going to hold the space for me. So that's the kind of trust that I'm talking about.

And I listen to you when you talk about the way your father was shot and killed, and then your daughter too. It's so powerful to hear what you say. You have what Dürckheim talked about—going through something that was annihilating. You now have a kind of moral authority to tell the truth about compassion and pain, because you know it. And to say, "Yes, and that's not all of who we are." You know something bigger, and that's a great gift.

So I honor that. Thank you, Seema.

Thank you, Jack.

"Oh, it's Tim!" Another friend from years and years back.

"How are you?"

"I'm great. It's so great to see you and hear you. I think we met about 44 years ago back at IMS. Every time you speak, it's something new."

"Well, I'm pleased to see you."

"Likewise. So I've been kind of going back to basics a little with my practice, and I've been trying to explore the Vedana practice."

Vedana—feeling, pleasant, neutral, unpleasant, yes.

"I've checked out like six different books and different guided meditations, and I just feel like they're either all over the place or they're not quite right. I was wondering if you had any guidance, any tips on good books or guided meditation recordings, or where to go for something like that."

You're talking about feeling. And there are two dimensions to it. One is the traditional dimension: that every experience can be felt as pleasant or neutral or unpleasant, and we tend to grasp the pleasant and resist the unpleasant. Becoming mindful of that is a gateway to liberation. In some way, that's probably all you need. The rest of those books you can put on your shelf for somebody else to read, honestly.

But there's also something really mysterious about feeling. We are in this human incarnation, and part of what makes us alive is the fact that we can feel. I have friends who are working on the biggest AI project

in the world for artificial intelligence computing, and their big question is: is it ever going to start to feel? Because that's what makes us human—that we feel joy and sorrow. There are the primary feelings, and then all these secondary emotions. From pleasure and pain come joy and sorrow, grief and delight, and so forth.

I think more of the practice is to appreciate feeling, not to figure it out, because it's a mystery. Nobody really knows how it is that we have feeling. It's ridiculous that life should feel in consciousness—and it does. It brings tears and it brings art. It brings communion and it brings war. It brings everything out of feelings, which is why the Buddhists say pay attention to feelings, because they can lead you different ways.

Let it be more of a mystery. Keep it really simple. Notice what feelings you follow. There's a practice in that: which feelings arise and which feelings you follow. Follow in what sense? It's not just that you avoid unpleasant and follow pleasant—there are all the secondary feelings and emotions. If you understand that, you start to become really wise about who Tim is in his life and his personality. And hopefully from it comes a greater and greater compassion and understanding. Wow, look at all this. This is what human life is like.

I'm just deeply appreciative that you're practicing with beginner's mind after 44 years. And I'll tell you a funny little story just as a way to end.

Sharon Salzberg, who we all know—the great goddess of metta, wonderful teacher and friend and colleague—when she was young in India, she was practicing as a very ardent student of Vipassana and meditation with Goenka and Munindra and Dipa Ma, her teachers. Somebody handed her the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* from Suzuki Roshi, which was published around that time, late 60s, early 70s. She looked at it and sort of tossed it aside and said, "I'm not a beginner. I don't need the beginning book." She told me this later. Only when she opened it did she discover what he says: the goal of meditation, the end of meditation, is always to keep your beginner's mind—in such a deep and brilliant way.

I know that when I go on retreat, sometimes I'll take it and just open it to a random page. Wherever I am, Suzuki Roshi speaks to me. It has that kind of absolute simplicity and absolute depth. So your inquiry into the mystery of feeling is totally cool. And beginner's mind is an advanced practice, so I salute you for it.

All right, everyone. Let's just take a couple of breaths, if you will. Be quiet just for half a minute. Feel whatever's touched or inspired you that you want to remember, because it's what you already know. Know that you can trust your good hearts.

There are twenty, thirty, fifty, sixty of us here together. You can also put words in the chat if you like. And there are probably thousands of people listening on Facebook as well. Say hello, or "I love you," or namaste, or whatever you wish to say. Greet each other. Bless one another. Wish everyone a good Thanksgiving in whatever way feels right.

Thank you. I want to look at all of you.

Be happy.

Have a glorious and wise and loving and peaceful and quiet and grateful Thanksgiving, in whatever way is possible and good for you.

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