Q and A: Rekindle and Renew | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 26:36

We have time for some questions or dialogue for a little bit, and then following this, I have one more story to tell you before we end this evening.

Linda, please go ahead.

"Hi, Jack. We're coming to the end of the year, a sad year for most of us as we've grieved for people we've known who've died, people around the world who we don't specifically know who died. Each year at the end of the year, we have an intention-setting ceremony around the solstice. I was wondering this year, in light of the fact that we won't be here together physically, what would you recommend for us to do? We usually have the red strings. How can we connect our intentions for the new year? We know there's going to be huge challenges during this winter, and yet we're all looking forward to the fact that we're moving forward with President Biden. I'd like to know how we connect with each other and connect with our own intentions in light of the fact that we won't be together here at Spirit Rock. What would be your thoughts on that?"

Thank you. I love your question because in some way you're bringing in what we've done over many, many years, as you describe, on the last Monday night or the beginning of the new year where we'll tie a blessing cord and begin by meditating on what is our deepest intention and where do we find spiritual refuge or sustenance. The beautiful thing about your bringing it up and describing it is that we've done it many, many years, and now we know how to do it. Even you, in some way, were teaching people as you described it.

So now, instead of physically holding hands on the solstice or on New Year's Eve or whenever the time feels right to you, go to your sacred place, go to your quiet place, go to your meditation place. Take a cord if you like—a red cord, you might—or not, or a piece of paper. Quiet your own mind and heart. And then listen. If you were to set the best intention for the year ahead, like setting the compass of your heart—this is the direction that most matters to me, this is what I want to live—let yourself reflect in that way and then write it, that deep intention.

It might be as simple as a kind of vow: I vow to be kind, which we've talked about every year. Or it might be something more eloquent and poetic, which some people will find, like that beautiful poem from the school prayer from Diana Ackerman: "I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

Or maybe you want to walk in the woods and stand in front of a tree. I speak for the trees—the redwoods and the dogwoods and the maples and the oaks—and listen and say, what is it that I want to do to set this intention of the heart? Write it down and make a prayer.

That's the beautiful thing I've seen in our community and in people all over: that even though we're not together in a physical way, we're carrying something, as you said so clearly, and we have it. So thank you for bringing it in for all of us.

"Thank you."

"Hi, Jack. My name is Anne. I live in South Louisiana. I'm a new meditator, and I think I'm at a point in my practice where I would probably really benefit from a retreat, which is probably not going to happen anytime soon."

And I have ADD. I'm easily distracted. So I don't know if an online retreat would work for me. I'm wondering if you have any suggestions of how I can bridge to some of the gifts that come from being present at a retreat until the time when I can actually do one.

First of all, thank you, Anne, for the question. And I appreciate hearing a voice from Louisiana, even as I mentioned it, you know?

You mentioned the Cajun Navy, and it was just like, oh—

My people.

I'm not from here originally, but I've been here for almost twenty years, so I got here as quick as I could.

Your people, yes—you're some very fine people too.

Anyway, with ADD, because it's an interesting thing, it's difficult in some ways in this culture, but it also is a kind of gift because it allows you to be aware of things in a whole different way, not just that narrow kind of focus. What helps you? What serves you to quiet your nervous system and collect yourself? What have you found that's good for yourself?

As far as practice goes, I really prefer just focusing on the breath. And when I'm kind of in the zone with that, I feel like I can move to more of an open awareness kind of thing. Guided meditations aren't necessarily my jam. But I've really been diligent about it for the last year and it's really been quite life-changing. No more antidepressants. It's just been really transformative, and I really do feel like there's a lot more out there.

Fantastic, fantastic. By the way, those of you who are listening, we did not pay her for this. No, it's really beautiful to hear. And I know it because I've seen it over the years, how people think that meditation is some grim duty when in fact it's an invitation that can change your life. And I hear that from you so beautifully.

So let me talk about retreats for a moment, because your instinct to do a retreat is a wise one. What we found to our surprise is that online retreats kind of work. We were thinking, oh God, you know, the experience of being together in a collective place out in the country, such as Spirit Rock, is so powerful. But now we've done six or eight months of online retreats. And believe it or not, the experience that people report—and it's somewhat fewer hours, you can modulate it so it works for you—there is a kind of collective coming together of having that time that works even online.

And I suspect even for you, since your practice of breath works, even with the ADD you described, it could be quite effective. What I'd suggest is that you start simply—try a three-day retreat, for example, if your schedule allows, if not even a day-long. You can look online at Spirit Rock or other places like that. Insight LA has some online retreats that are very good. And there's an organization called Buddhist Geeks that offers a series of online retreats that are actually also quite good with some Spirit Rock teachers.

Look online and do it as an experiment. You experimented, you were brave enough—and I think wise enough, in some way intuitively—to find a meditation with the breath that worked for you. And clearly it has. I think you could trust yourself to try an online retreat, and it will surprise you. And if it does, let me know. Send me a message.

I surely will. Thank you.

Thank you. It's a pleasure.

that seismographs placed around the world to measure earthquakes have been detecting something remarkable: the vibrations caused by human activity on the earth have gone down. The earth is calming as we slow down. And this started me thinking about other good things that have happened this year. Friends I used to see occasionally—now we have Zoom chats once a month. We've had holiday gatherings that brought together people from around the country rather than just those who live nearby. So I wanted to ask your thoughts about the changes from this last year that you hope might continue, the good things that might come out of this time.

It's a moving and beautiful question. And in it, you've already started to provide the answer. Were we together in a room when you raised this question, you might describe how you're closer to certain friends around the world, how you connect in ways you weren't able to before. You get to live a life that's more measured, and the earth isn't shaking from so many cars and airplanes and people running around. That's the beneficial side of what's happened to us.

I saw it in my granddaughter's graduation. It was really sad—they didn't have a prom this past spring, didn't have the usual celebrations. Instead, all the students in her grade, some forty of them at this small school, each made a little video. Each one spoke. And it was so much more intimate than watching someone walk across a stage to receive a diploma. You saw each of these girls' faces, heard them say: This is my message. This is what I learned. This is what I care about in the world. It was surprisingly beautiful

and intimate.

So I guess I have to ask you, since I don't have a room full of people: If you were to make a wish or a hope or a prayer for what we would keep from this time, what would it be?

"My wish would be that we keep this sense of things slowing down, of looking inward more—so that when we can again interact with each other, we carry that with us. That's what I would hope."

What a beautiful blessing to end the questions on, to carry that hope forward. The story tonight of Seijo coming back, reuniting in some deep way—what you've described from the pandemic has allowed us to reconnect in stillness, in simplicity. There's a beauty to it, something truly nourishing that you don't want us to lose, that we don't want to lose, that our practice supports us in holding.

I think of the words of the poet Derek Walcott, who tells us to fall in love with the world in spite of history—to step out of history and ideas and time, and actually come back to this world as it is, this marvelous world. So thank you to all who asked questions.

I have one more story to tell as a way to end our evening.

For almost twenty years at Spirit Rock, on my last teaching night before the holidays—Christmas, New Year, Hanukkah, whatever it might be—we would collect money in a basket for the soup kitchen in San Rafael, the nearest town to Spirit Rock. The B Street Soup Kitchen had been open for decades, and usually we'd fill a basket mostly with ones and fives, maybe fifteen hundred dollars in small bills. I would put them in a bag and go down to the soup kitchen, where I'd occasionally volunteered anyway, and bring this big bag of dollar bills. Sometimes a staff member from Spirit Rock would come with me. It was such a treat because of the outpouring of hearts from the three hundred people that night, all putting money in the basket.

Tonight, I was thinking about carrying on that spirit. Christina, who helps organize things at Spirit Rock, said she had bought a thousand cookies for everyone, the way we've done for celebratory nights in previous years. You'll have to take those cookies out of your own pantry now—they're waiting for you after the talk. But I thought it would still be beautiful to make an offering in this same spirit of falling in love with the world, of knowing we're not disconnected.

The organization I want to tell you about is a small one called iACT—small i, capital A-C-T. It describes itself, quite accurately, as a small but mighty anti-genocide group. It was started by a group of friends in Southern California who, after what happened in Rwanda, said: We can't sit by and let such things continue.

Their first and major project for the last fifteen years has been in the Darfur refugee camps. You know how it is with crises around the world—Darfur was a big thing in the news for a while, then supplanted by the Rohingya, by Syria, and on we could go. But the people there are still there.

What iACT has done is beautiful, and the way they work is part of the story. They went in and sat down with the women in these dusty, poor camps holding hundreds of thousands of people. They asked the women, in circles: What do you want? What do you need? This is very different from the normal NGO approach, the big organizations that come in with their programs to feed people or organize things, replicating what they do from one place to the next. iACT just went and sat with them and listened.

What the women said they wanted were two things: soccer, and kindergarten for their children.

When asked why, they said: We want soccer so our children know they're part of a bigger world, that they're not left out. If you look online at iACT, you'll see they helped form the Darfuri International Soccer Team.

All these kids who were playing barefoot received balls and eventually got shoes, going on to compete in an international competition as Darfuri United. And everybody in those camps heard about it and was rooting for them to even get one goal—which they did.

But the other thing they did was to create these little "ponds," as they called them, to begin educating the little children. That education also gave free time to the parents to be able to go collect firewood or whatever they needed. But more importantly, the mothers wanted it because it showed the children that they could learn and how important that was.

Trudy, my beloved wife, went to Africa to do some teaching in those camps. She has a history in, among many things, early childhood education—she ran a model school for part of Harvard Medical School. Early education is really one of the things she understood deeply, as well as being a mindfulness teacher. So she went to help educate the teachers in each of these little ponds or schools they had built.

The beautiful thing is that not only were they making schools for these young kids, but in the schools, the children would get one meal a day, which was a huge thing because many were undernourished. And equally importantly, the teachers were educated and had jobs and meaning. Now there are many of these ponds with many teachers and hundreds and hundreds of children.

When Trudy came back, she told me she had taught them all kinds of skills for helping children with early development—playful skills, mindful skills, attention practices, all the things she knew from her work in early education. She had trained the teachers both how to do that and how to center themselves with mindfulness and compassion practices, loving-kindness.

At the end, she asked them what their favorite thing had been. Was it the mindful games for the kids? Was it the various things she taught? To her surprise, they said it was mindfulness—it was the meditation.

She asked, "Why is that?"

And they said, "Well, our past was so terrible. Our villages were burned. Many of the people we knew, even in our own families, were killed. We had to run in the night, in the dark, across the desert with wild

animals. Some of us escaped with our children and our lives. So we can't go back to that past. And we've been in these camps now for many years, and we don't know how much longer we'll be here, so it doesn't help us to think about the future in that way either. But what you taught us was to live fully in the present, where we are. It helps so much to ease our hearts, to be alive where we are. So thank you for training us in mindfulness."

My invitation for you tonight: make a contribution to IACT. I'll put in the first thousand dollars myself. I think we can get five thousand dollars and create a pond—a whole school with trained teachers, supporting children, giving them meals for a year. It's a huge thing that we're able to do together.

Somehow it feels like then we embrace brothers and sisters and children, women, people in another part of the world who are really also part of our world. It ends, in some small way, our sense of exile or impotence—that feeling of "what can we do?" Because we actually are connected. We can do things. We can share our blessings.

So I hope that you can support that. And more than that—I won't speak to you until the new year has come, sometime in January—I really hope you have blessed holidays. Wait in the darkness and listen in that fertile darkness, that beautiful darkness. Know that there's a light that you can trust, just as the sun will come back. There's a possibility, if we listen, that's only limited by our own hearts.

Thank you. Thank you for your kindness, your attention, your own meditation, your care, and for whatever donations you offer. But more than that, it's just wonderful to see you all. Imagine somehow that we were in a room sharing cookies and smiles and touching one another and writing our intentions. And in a way, we are—even in this fashion.

Thank you, and good night.

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