Q and A: Reconciliation

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 29:56

I'm lighter than when I came tonight, so I'm looking to you for some wisdom. I work at a public high school in a wellness center, and I've been doing a great job for about eleven months, but my students are struggling and I'm becoming heartbroken for them. I'm a helper type, as I suspect everyone is on this call, and I'm running out of help to give, it feels like. I thought I would see if you had advice for me to give to them.

And are you a teacher? I didn't catch what your role was.

I'm an intake specialist in a wellness center, and I'm a mindfulness teacher. A student advocate.

Oh, yes. Doctor, take your own medicine, I see.

You know, I think the first thing is just to acknowledge that this is a lot of suffering. And if you're a young person, a year is like a huge chunk of your entire life. So my experience with young people is that they're really grieving. They've lost so much. And they need to have this acknowledged. The first thing to say is, this is suffering, and you are experiencing it. It's grief. And not to cover it over.

But then I have a question for you. What have you found that is most helpful to your students? What have you learned?

A lot of what you talked about tonight, which is listening. Listening is what they need.

So you listen to them and they can express their tears and their sorrow and their anger and their frustration. All they're experiencing—loss. And you can say, this is one of the great losses of your life. You'll look back and say you lived through this. But really, you're listening. What else helps?

Inviting them to name their experience. Even though we have lessons we have to cover, we're setting everything aside. What's inside you? What's happening?

That's really beautiful, because we have our ideas of what's needed, but right now what's needed is much more the listening of the heart—just what you said—putting some of the lessons aside, because they're not learning them anyway, you said. So this is the chance to get real, and to also teach them that it's okay to be real, that part of school is to learn to do this. So that helps them: listening, telling the truth, not being fixed on the plan. All right, so what's helped you? Now you know how to help them. Turn the spotlight back.

Well, my job's rewarding. It's very rewarding. They're grateful. They're beautiful. I'm impressed by them.

I'm proud of them. I'm trying to be as resilient as I see they are.

But you don't feel it right now.

I don't feel it.

So close your eyes for a second. There's been so much loss in this, and it's so difficult. Where do you carry the loss in your body? The tears for what you've tried to do so hard?

Right in there—upper chest, throat.

What does it feel like? Warm? Cool? What's its shape?

It feels tight.

Tightness. Is there a temperature?

Yes—hot. Hot and tight.

Hot and tight. So let it be there, and bring your loving awareness to the pain that it carries. This is really how you carry the grief in your body. And let it open. Let it actually expand and get bigger. Let it fill as much of your whole body, or the room, if it wants. You can name it—grief, tears, pain, whatever it is. Fire. And notice what happens as you give it space. Does it get bigger? Does it intensify? Expand?

It feels like it's softening.

So notice that. Notice the softening. You're allowing it, and it's softening. What does it want you to understand?

I think that I won't always be this way.

So feel that. Feel that you've paid attention and given it space. It's softened. And now it's speaking to your heart and saying, "It's not always going to be this way." And listen—how does that resonate? How does that affect your body?

It feels right. It feels centered.

Yes. So feel the centeredness and the rightness now. Oh, nobly born—this is your return to your Buddha nature. It doesn't mean you don't carry a deep grief in your body and heart for all the loss, for these young people. It doesn't mean you don't get exhausted. But there's something in you that's inexhaustible, that knows this is not the end of the story, that it does have an end. You can soften and carry.

Again, Nelson Mandela: "Don't judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." You're in it with Nelson now. You're in it for the long haul. And just think about it—twenty-seven years on Robben Island was half of his whole life. Like your students, it feels that way—up

and down. And yes, you carry something, and you're learning to do it with them. They buoy you up and you buoy them up, and of course you go through those times. How are you feeling?

Just filled with love. Thank you.

Thank you so much. Thank you, Casey. A pleasure.

Hey, Jack. Thank you so much for tonight's teaching. Personally, it's felt quite relevant. I've really noticed an uptick in the dehumanizing language that my own friends are using in relation to people on the other side of the political aisle. And I've also personally experienced a great reconciliation with a friend who I hadn't spoken with in over a decade. So it feels timely. I have a great desire to bring some of this reconciliation practice to bear on my own life. But I also realize that could be dangerous without the right grounding. So I wondered if you thought it appropriate for me to take the framework you showed us and start applying it to maybe small, low-level conflicts in my own personal community—or if not, if there were places you would point me to where I could gain training and grounding?

First of all, it's a beautiful question. And I can hear the goodness of your own heart and psyche—to say, "I resonate with this. I know this, I've seen it. And I want to know if I can help others." So I just want to honor that goodness that comes out of you in asking the question. Can you give an example of a kind of place you would want to bring this into?

There are two places that come to mind. I have two really good friends who have gotten into such a terrible conflict that they are no longer speaking, their families are no longer speaking. They've devolved into text messages—even step one, face to face, is not part of the picture. And then I have another situation where two family members have grown estranged over divergent political views, such that I don't know if they'll ever talk to each other. It just seems to me such a loss.

I'm moved by what you say. I think I would start with the friends if you're going to do it. Because quite honestly, family is almost too hard. Even the Buddha and Jesus had trouble with their families when they went home. So you have to understand that's the steep path—maybe you should go to the summit first, then come back.

There is actually a description of this process if you would like to read it. One place you can find it is in Thich Nhat Hanh's book called *Old Path White Cloud*. It's a great big fat book that is a biography of the Buddha. Somewhere in the middle, in chapter forty-seven—these short chapters—is the whole description of this practice and this process. What I understand is that Thich Nhat Hanh's community—they have Deer Park in Southern California and so forth—they actually use this process. When I was in the monastery, I became part of one of these processes.

So I think first you might want to educate yourself more. Read that, and then look at Deer Park. Once you've done it, then you might ask your friends if they're interested—because if they are, it's possible. If they're not... the Buddha, when he was called in, said, "Okay, I can help you." And they said, "No, we don't

want this." So he got up and he left. He was called the teacher of those who can be taught. You have to find out. They may be so caught in it for now. But you also might be able to speak to them and say, "Here's something I've learned."

I'd like to ask you to close your eyes for a moment and get quiet. As you do, first I'd like you to picture these two friends and notice what you feel inside. Keeping your eyes closed, tell me what it's like for you.

I've shared some really good memories with each of them. So I almost felt like a tickle, like I want to laugh a little bit. It feels warm when I think about that.

So there's a warmth and a tingle and almost a laugh, and a memory of all these good things that you've shared with each of them. As you feel all of this, also now bring in: what is your heart's best intention in wanting to work with them? What is your intention?

I think there are some simple truths that they each have that if they just spoke and listened to each other... my intention for them is that they could just listen to each other. I've seen this so much with my parents, how terrible it can be when there isn't just the willingness to listen.

So your intention is that they listen to each other. And what's your intention for yourself? What do you hope for, Christian?

I want to, as we say in Brooklyn, walk the walk. I want to embody what it means to be a person who can listen and who can speak truth. I want to cultivate that—not just for myself, but for my deep, close relationships.

So now imagine that you could say what you just told me to each of them separately. "This is what I want. I want to embody this. I want to carry this." Imagine that you could say that to them, no matter whether they choose to do it or not. This is your heart speaking.

"How does it feel as you picture that?"

"The word that came up was integrity. I feel sort of solid and aligned."

"So feel the quality of solid and aligned—that integrity and the deep love that is there. 'I want to live with this love. I want people to come together.' And obviously there's joy and affection and love that you have for each of them. Now imagine that you're able to say this to them, however they're going to respond. You're going to start by talking about what matters to you, not to them. Feel that integrity and the strength that you have, the love. And finally, let yourself be peaceful with it, because they may or may not listen. Imagine that you can say this out of love, without expectation, and see how that lands in you."

"I think I can do that."

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel good. I feel rested, almost."

"Next time I'll get you an application for graduate school in mediation, but we'll work a step at a time here. No, I love your intention, because you love them both. I could feel it. And you've had so much joy and pleasure with one another. That deep intention that you carry—if you can express it... So learn a little bit. Look at Thich Nhat Hanh's community, read these things, and play with it. You don't need to be a professional. You don't need to go to graduate school and become a mediator. You can be somebody who loves these people and say, 'Listen, there's a simple process. Maybe you want to try some of it.' And let them listen."

"Thank you. I really wish you well."

"Thank you so much, Jack."

"One more. Seema, would you like to speak?"

"Sure."

"Go ahead, dear."

"Hi, Jack. I have asked you a question before, and I noticed someone else is raising her hand. So maybe I can ask my question later because I feel..."

"Well, you're here. The karma, the fates, the universe has put us together. We're having our moment. It's fine. Please ask."

"The first aspiration that I had to come to this teaching tonight was related to the political situation that we're in. But today I was presented with two different conflicts in two sets of people that is, I believe, rooted in the same type of challenge. And I was asked for suggestions that I could make. I need to be skillful—that's my intention. Where do you draw the line between self-compassion and compassion for the others? Because in both these sets of couples, I felt like they have exhausted everything in them, and yet I could see the spark, the flame of some hope. But it was just exhausting, and I need to get some guidance..."

"Are you doing this as a friend, or as a therapist or professional?"

"A mindfulness teacher."

"You're a mindfulness teacher, yes. So when I used to work with couples as a psychologist, especially if they were really in a lot of conflict—I remember one time this couple came in, and they were in very heated conflict."

And they came in and I said, "Well, let's first let you find a way to sit so that you feel safe with one another." Immediately the woman got up and walked out the door and slammed it. Then she cracked the door open and I could see one little eye peeking in. She said, "Okay, I feel safe out here." That's how difficult it was.

In some way, you have to start where you are with people. I'm not sure that it's your job as a mindfulness teacher to do couples work, quite honestly. If you choose to, that's okay, but it's not really in the curriculum to be the couple. It's a whole different training. If you love these people and feel that you can listen to them, and they're willing, they're amenable, of course you can do it. But what I'm hearing from you is that they've kind of worn you out.

"Yeah, it just happened right before this session. During the meditation, they just came up because one of them is pregnant, she's having a C-section on Friday, and there is betrayal going on. It's just very unsettling."

All right, so close your eyes for a moment and feel what you're feeling. Even as you tell this, there's actually both upset—maybe some grief, maybe some anger at how they're behaving. What are the emotions storming around in you?

"Weariness. Compassion."

You have compassion, but you've got more than compassion. You're a little bit fed up and you're worried.

"I am looking at the whole—in the person who has betrayed..."

Yes. You shake your head. What comes out when you shake your head? What would come out?

"Because it's easy to accuse someone for something he has done. But when I get to the root, I have compassion for him."

All right, so you have both. But how are you feeling about this? Do you want to continue being in this role of trying to help these stubborn people?

"Yes."

All right, so what would now go into your heart? What state could you bring that would most serve them?

"Steady heart. Patience."

Is it hard for you to be with them? No? So you can bring a steady heart.

Now I want you to imagine that you have somebody to help you—the most amazing being. It could be Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, or Mother Mary, or Buddha, whoever it is. Imagine that they could appear and be with you, come right next to you and say, "I'm going to help you." See who wants to

come. Who arrives?

"Should I name her?"

Yeah.

"My mentor in my program, Trish."

Okay, your mentor. She's wise and she's strong.

So now imagine that you and she can hold hands and you go in. And as you said, you're full of compassion and you're steady. They may listen to you and they may not, but your role is to be that centered, steady heart that says, "You know, there's another way." You hold it in your heart and they can feel it from you. They feel how peaceful and strong you are. And then you ask them: do they want this?

How does that feel to you?

They came to me because they wanted it.

That you will have to find out. Because you can't fix people. But you can love them. And you can be in their presence. And you can even say, "I love you both. And I'm steady with you. And I want you to find a way if you can." And then you'll see. You can't fix them, but you can love them.

Is it possible for me to just help them widen the aperture of their view?

You can invite them. You can invite them to see how many couples have struggled like they have, that they're not alone, that right now, this very day on January 25th, there are 485,000 couples across America alone who are in the same sort of situation—and that this is human. It's not just them, but it's us. And that the ones who are wise hold it with some tenderness and say, "All right, we can get through this."

How are you doing?

And now I'm dealing with the wanting-to-be-perfect me.

Want to do it perfectly? Oh, well, yeah. You might as well let that one go. You do it as good as you can. We're all perfectly human, you know, and you'll do some and some will be beneficial and some won't, but you do the best you can. If you do it with love in the end—if that's your intention—that carries almost everything that matters.

I wish you well. I wish them well. I wish all the 485,362 couples who are struggling well, especially under COVID. It's not that easy. That book that a friend, Esther Perel, wrote—a New York Times bestseller, one of her areas of expertise is around sexuality—it's called *Mating in Captivity*, about marriage in some way. But really, we're now under COVID, we're all in captivity in some way. But like Nelson Mandela discovered, they can put your body in prison, but no one can imprison your spirit.

And when you carry that spirit of love that you have and steadiness, and you can say, "You know, this is human what you're going through, and it's possible to get through it."

So I thank you, Seema. I thank you to everyone who listened.

Let's just take thirty seconds to be quiet together.

What I heard from each of you who spoke—and you represent so many more of us—is this longing for reconciliation, to actually be an agent of love and compassion for ourselves and for those around. Trust this. This is your good heart and your Buddha nature. Sometimes you may need to walk away for a time, as the Buddha did. But then you come back. And you bring your gifts back from your steadiness of your meditation, your peaceful time.

Oh nobly born, you carry the seeds that the world needs. Trust them. Make your heart a zone of peace and compassion and steadiness as you move through the world.

Thank you all.

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