Q and A: The Sacred Pause

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 20:02

So we have a bit of time for questions or your own description of your practice. How are you gardening? What are you working with in gardening yourself, tending your own heart or tending the community in the world around you?

Ernest, if you want to unmute and ask your question.

"Hello, Jack."

Hi, Ernie. Glad to see you. We've known each other for thirty years or more.

"Right, for forty. We're pretty close."

Forty. Yeah. We were young, remember?

"Oh, yeah. We were young and foolish, and now you know how it is."

I know. As Ryokan said, "Last year a foolish monk, this year no change."

"So my question is, I would like some encouragement and ways of moving from awareness to this loving awareness. I mean, I know the phrase, and I've been doing the practice for a long time. So the awareness, more or less. But what are some ways of moving toward this quality of loving awareness? It's a word. I can sort of get it, but I don't think I can really rock it."

We've talked about this, but I'm trying to remember. Do you ever do metta practice? Does it work for you or does it feel artificial?

"It's pretty much artificial, pretty much rote, mechanical kind of thing."

Okay, so close your eyes for a moment and sit here and tune into your body just as you sit. Notice both the sensations, the quality of ease as you sit, and also the places of tension or pain that you have, as in everybody. And keeping your eyes closed, notice it all. Are there areas that are tense or tight or painful, as well as places of relaxation?

"Not particularly."

So your body's pretty much at ease?

"Pretty much, yeah. A little pressure at the bottom of my spine from the way I'm sitting, but that's it."

All right, so first of all, some gratitude to have the body at ease. And as we know with human bodies, they're not always at ease. Now imagine that the most loving person you can think of comes over and puts their arm around your shoulder and says, "I am with you," and just kind of sidles up and holds you in some really kind way as a brother or sister or loving being. Imagine how that feels.

"There's a kind of softness and relaxation across my shoulders. I'm imagining Hamid, by the way."

Lovely. So imagine here's Hamid putting his arm around you with this very big heart that he has, saying, "Ernie," you know, he's really loving. You can feel he loves you. Your shoulders relax, your body. Now feel this. What you're experiencing is loving awareness. You've got it. How does it feel?

"There's a kind of softness, a little bit of tears coming up. Relaxation pretty much along here, kind of an 'oh' sort of quality."

Yeah. And you could do the same for—

emotions or things that come up—you can hold them in that same way, or imagine Hameed with you. And then you can extend it in ways to others. So it's a beautiful question, and it was fun to go on the ride with you and enjoy it. Thank you.

Just as an aside, I don't know if you remember back in the early 90s, you were teaching groups of senior students at Spirit Rock. There were two groups of about twenty-five each. I don't know if you recall.

Yes, I do remember that we did that.

Oh, half a dozen of us are still meeting twice a month.

Fantastic. That's beautiful. I'm inspired. And the beautiful thing is that we start to teach one another—we actually help each other. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, the next Buddha is going to be the Sangha. It's actually going to be us all holding hands and connecting hearts. So thank you.

Lovely. Thank you.

Let's take another question.

Hello, Jack. I was really called upon to ask a question before the talk, and I don't really have a specific question. I guess I just wanted to share that I've found lately with my meditation practice a desire and longing and craving for experience—for deeper concentration, for peacefulness. And the thing that I found is that what really matters right now is just to love and to be at ease and to be accepting and to just allow. To allow the good, the bad. It's a whole other way, a whole other feeling. It's just a lot more beautiful.

Thank you for sharing this. You described something so important and wise. There are meditative states and experiences, and they can be beautiful. You can have bliss, or dissolve into light, or your mind

becomes so still. These are beautiful things worth experiencing and having. But they're not really the goal, because they don't last. Everything changes. And if you get caught—"I want concentration, I want bliss"—then you struggle.

They're useful to know. They open you, and you realize, "Oh, this heart and mind can be peaceful." But then what you said on top of that, with so much wisdom, is that there is a different way, a different dimension—what I'll call the loving witness, the loving awareness—of loving things as they are. That gives you a freedom wherever you are. So mostly I'm just repeating back what you said as a kind of gratitude and acknowledgment, because it's beautiful. And it's beautiful for everybody to listen to and hear.

Thank you. Thanks for your teachings.

It's a pleasure. Thank you.

So as I build up my own little sangha and start teaching—I'm going to start my fourth cohort on Zoom, and I took your and Tara's teacher training, which was absolutely amazing—the one thing that's interesting is that because of all the research that has come out, there is this trap of getting into meditation as part of a great self-improvement project. It's interesting because at the same time, I want to make it appealing for people. I want to bring in as many people as I can reach. But I want to make it clear that that's not really necessarily the goal, that there is no such thing as a goal. As you said, it's not about becoming a good meditator. So I just wanted to see if you have anything to say about the mishaps of all this research. It's a good way to bring people in, but I don't want to be misleading them.

The beautiful thing is that they're both true. They're not actually opposite. Again, it's like that plowing sutra where the Buddha is already content and absolutely joyful and at peace and free, and he says, "I did my plowing to get here." But where it led him was to this freedom. So in some way, these are different dimensions of practice.

Very often in the beginning, people will come because they're suffering or because they need to release their stress, or they need to find a way to steady themselves in the midst of upheaval, or work with their fear. Those are beautiful and legitimate ways to practice. There's a certain way in which the Four Noble Truths say there is suffering, and it has its causes, and there's an end to that. But that's not the end of the story. The story goes on to say you can have more peace.

So it's a beautiful thing to say. You don't have to say this is the only thing, this is the beginning, or this is where you start. But in fact, the goal of practice really is to learn how to love, or to learn how to be at peace wherever you are, even with all the ups and downs. And we'll get to that too. In some way, you get to offer them—you open the banquet, and it gets even bigger, because all of that is part of it. Those are valuable things for people, worth honoring. And what makes you a good teacher is that you know that beyond any particular change or improvement idea they have, it's actually possible to invite them to a kind of freedom and well-being.

Are you enjoying the teaching?

I'm loving teaching. I think the thing I get snagged on is when I'm trying to get a group together—where can I find the people? Or maybe I feel rejected because I reach out to people and they don't want to do it. I don't want to put that on them. Sometimes people are not ready. Sometimes it's really not what they want to be doing with their time.

Yes. And sometimes it will be a very small group. When Suzuki Roshi first came to San Francisco, he sat with two people. And then this whole beautiful community grew. He talked about it. He said, "If I sit myself, if two people come, that's fine. If ten people come, it's fine."

We have ways in which we judge ourselves. I think about Ram Dass again. Many years ago he said, "I used to go in and there'd be a Ram Dass lecture, and the first thing I would do would be to count the house to see how many people came to see Ram Dass." Am I worthy or something? So that's part of being human. And what you do is just smile and say, "Yeah, but actually you don't know." That one person—if you have a group and there's one or two people—you could change their life. And they could change the world.

You have no idea. So I think what you're doing is really beautiful, and it will grow. It's like gardening—you just keep watering the good seeds and things will grow.

"Hi Jack, thank you for all the wonderful teachings. I've been following you for thirty-five years."

This is what I've been doing. One of the things about getting older is you get less afraid to do what you think you should do. In my heart, my feeling is that everybody is worthy, but most people really don't see their own beauty. And so what my practice has been about, in large part, is trying to have the courage to express to them what I see.

I have worked with people both professionally and as a volunteer, and in everyday life—people who are really quite extraordinary in their way, who have no idea. And in telling them, it's been interesting to see the response. Sometimes there are tears: "Nobody's ever said that." Sometimes it's just seeing that they feel seen and known, and that they don't have to be perfect to be that good.

What brings me some grief is when I see the violence that takes place. I really believe that some of those people who commit it have no idea that they are worthy, and that it comes from that. It's difficult for me sometimes just to calm down and say, "It's okay. You can't get to everybody."

But the other thing is that when you do this, something comes back to you, whether you ask for it or not. It's almost like a heart song—you're both in tune with each other. I think what I would like my practice to continue doing is to keep seeing, to keep looking, to look beyond whatever the norm is. It's like when you love somebody and someone asks you if they're beautiful—your automatic reaction is, "Oh yes." You don't even know what they look like anymore. You see them beyond that.

A lot of what you have taught me over the years is the joy of this, the humor of it and the joy. And I would like to continue that. Even if some people would think it's somewhat Pollyanna-ish, it doesn't matter, because I want to confirm what you said: sometimes you can say it to one person and make such a significant difference that it's worth all the risks you took to put yourself out there. So thank you again, because you've changed my life.

I just want to take a breath. Listening to what you say really touches me. It's beautiful. I can feel how you do that with people and how it shines back and forth—that they shine back to you from it. And then I start to think, "Gosh, I wish there were some people I'd like you to talk to in this world before they do more harm." So that the beauty you see in them could, as you do, actually be known to them too.

What a marvelous thing to do. Like that last question—the idea is not to perfect yourself; it's really to perfect your love.

And I think this is kind of a place where we'll stop tonight, because I can't say anything beyond this. It feels like this is a beautiful place for us all to rest in—to hear you speak of seeing the secret beauty in those around you and then giving the gift of speaking to them, letting them know that. And maybe that's what we can do for one another more than anything: to create true community, to create a community of love on this earth. And then we start to act in different ways and tend to the planet and tend to one another.

So I thank you for that, and so much thanks to everyone who spoke, to all of those of you who attended. Just to begin the spring, to take a pause, and to look around, and then to sense: What is our best intention, our deepest intention? What are the seeds that we are planting and watering? What do we want to water to make things beautiful, joyful?

Thank you all for coming. Thanks for those who spoke. Take good care of yourself, and enjoy the spring amidst it all.

Good night.

And so we pause to look around, to sense what is our best intention, our deepest intention. What are the seeds that we are planting and watering? What do we want to cultivate to make things beautiful, joyful?

Thank you all for coming, and thanks to those who spoke. Take good care of yourselves and enjoy the spring amidst it all.

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