Q&A: Joy (Muditā) | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 18:52

Let's have a little conversation. We'll take a few questions or dialogues. What's on your heart? What has this touched in you? What is it that you'd like to open or bring forth—your experience, your questions?

Kristen: When you asked what it would look like for us if we embodied our joy, I think for me it has something to do with being less afraid of death. I'm going through a complex kind of health crisis, and there's a lot of fear. I have had this experience on retreat before—kind of unrelated, but an experience of entering into really just layers and layers and layers of remorse, and feeling so much joy in the remorse. It was deeply painful but very beautiful. I feel like for me, if I had this kind of trust that I can enter fully into the fear that I'm feeling, it would be very freeing. I just wondered if you had any reflections or reinforcement for that.

First of all, thank you for the realness of your question. Already it has so much wisdom in it, because there you were on retreat and you touched a place where you went through the remorse itself to a place of acceptance in the heart of joy—to say, all right, I can be with this. You remember that you did that. And it's pretty amazing that you could, because people run away from that.

So now Mara has come, like Mara does under the Bodhi tree, and says, "Okay, baby, you dealt with remorse. I'm going to give you a bigger one. How about death?" Right? You're sick anyway. You're frightened. "I'm going to come as fear."

So close your eyes for a moment. Take a couple of breaths and feel the tenderness that's there in you. Even as you describe and remember going through those layers of remorse until you came to a place of joy—what did that joy feel like? Keep your eyes closed. Can you say?

Kristen: Oh, yeah. It felt like reconciliation. It felt like a return to...

Stay with it. Keep your eyes closed. You said this remorse felt like—use that word again.

Kristen: It felt like reconciliation.

Yes, like reconciliation. All right, now close your eyes one more time. And feel that reconciliation. Even for all the regret and all the remorse, you have that.

And now Mara comes and says, "Okay, I'm going to show you death now. Your body—it's going to grow old at some point. You're going to have to face death. That's going to happen. It happens to everyone. So I'm going to try and scare you."

And you feel Mara coming, saying, "Oh, it's scary, it's scary."

And now you remember. You say, "I see you, Mara. I see you trying to scare me. But I remember the reconciliation. I remember how I can go through all of this and find a joy anyway."

Remember what that feels like in your body. And notice what it's like when Mara comes and tries to scare you. What do you see? What do you feel?

When Mara is present, there's so much closing. And there's a desire to flee myself, just run away.

Yes, natural. Mara scares you. "I want to run away. It's too painful." You say, "Mara, you're really scary. I want to run away from you."

But now you're like the Buddha who sat there, who felt the reconciliation and the joy of going through everything difficult. And now Mara's saying, "All right, I'm upping the game."

And you say, "I see you, Mara. I feel you. The fear is hard. It's scary. I see the closing and the clinging." You notice all that with a kind heart. "And I'm not going to abandon my kindness. I can even have kindness for you, Mara. We're in this together."

Bring in the whole feeling of compassion for your humanity and all you're going through—and the deep knowledge that when you go through the remorse and the pain and the fear that Mara presents, the loving awareness that you are can hold it all. Feel it. Stay with it.

How are you doing with it?

I'm grateful that you said this thing about Mara upping the ante, because I can see how this could be a gift for me—to encounter some aspects of reality more fearlessly, more directly.

We all have to do it. Mara comes to everyone. He wasn't just in India 2,500 or 2,600 years ago. He happens to live in Des Moines, and Marin County, and in Plano, Texas. Mara gets around.

And Mara will come and say, "I'm going to scare you." And you say—this is what the Buddha said when Mara appeared—"I see you, Mara. I see your stories. I feel you. I feel your fear, your anger, all those stories that you tell. I see who you are."

But that place you found in yourself can say, "I see you, and I know something deeper."

You know this—deeper than remorse. And you already found it. I trust that you know this.

Yes, you lose it. That's fine. We all lose it. Everybody loses it. But it doesn't go away. It's like the joy—it's there underneath.

So live your days. And Mara will come. And as Thich Nhat Hanh says, serve Mara some tea.

Say, "All right, I know you come around regularly, and you're scary. You put on your scary costume, and death is terrifying. But who I am is the awakened one. I'm the one who knows that yes, those stories are just stories, and my heart is big enough to hold all of this."

It's a fun practice. I mean, it's very hard and painful—you're sick, and you're thinking, "I might die," and Mara comes. But you're not dying right now. You might as well have a good time while you can.

Let me share one more question, from Stephen.

"Hi, Jack. I guess first of all, I just want to thank you. You've been my teacher for twenty years, and I really thank you. And even tonight, it's like every time there's a new opening.

"My question was kind of answered before it got to me, but I'll share. My parents came from Germany right after the war, and my father—I grew up with all these stories of just the terrible destruction and inhumanity. And the terrible guilt of not knowing what to do, or what else he could have done.

"It's plagued me in a couple of ways. One is this feeling that I should be more engaged, that there are all these horrible things in the world and I should know about them and be involved. And at the same time, I get so overwhelmed with rage and sadness and everything. I want to continue my spiritual growth, and for so long it seemed like I needed to put those two together, but they seemed diametrically opposite—like I couldn't do both.

"I just got off of a twenty-eight-day retreat, and the nun who led it said one of the things you need to do is become harmless, helpful, kind, and reliable. And that starts in your own heart, with yourself. So during this retreat, it was about always coming back and asking, 'How can you be there for yourself?'

"That started a process. I used to play this game from my father, I guess—after all the things he lost—this game of 'What can't they take away from me?' And during the retreat, it was like every longing, every everything—it was like, 'Okay, they can take that too. They can take that too.' It got to the point where I was sitting there asking, 'What if I can't move my body anymore?' And just asking, 'Can I still make this a friendly place?' Something you said tonight, in this latest answer, really opened something. I feel like I got that last little bit—this thing of joy, that when I don't know what else to do, to look for that. So I really want to thank you."

There's so much beauty in what you describe. And as you said, you've in some way answered the very thing that you wrestle with. Let me add a couple of things, just like icing on your good cake.

First, you know that you carry the epigenetics of World War II. It's in your cells and in your body in ways that are passed on. And now neuroscience and genetics shows that.

So that's part of the suffering that you carry. But then, as Ram Dass said—and I often tell this story because he was asked about being Jewish—he said at some point, "Yeah, but remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." And you're only German on your parents' side. But the other side of you is the nobly born,

the one who knows, the carrier of wisdom that you're finding now in yourself.

So it's not that you don't have that. The epigenetics brings you the rage and overwhelm. You feel all the stuff that was there—you can't not. But it's not who you are. That's only your parents' side, not the nobility, the true side that you are.

And then there's that teaching you mentioned from this retreat about being helpful and kind and harmless to people, and reliable. We get overwhelmed when we think of all the sufferings in the world. But to think that you have to change them—for any of us, that would be kind of egotistical. "I'm going to fix the world." Damn, I can just barely fix dinner for my wife in time, and now I'm supposed to fix the whole world?

So instead, close your eyes just for a minute. Let yourself think or imagine some small thing—you may be doing it already, or you could—helping at a local soup kitchen, or extending your help to people standing in line to get vaccinated as a volunteer, or attending something. Let yourself imagine that you could do something, that you could reach out your hand and mend the fabric of the community around you. Notice what happens when you reflect in this way. It's very simple. What do you notice?

"An opening, an opening in my heart, and a voice that says, 'Just enough.'"

Just enough. Yeah, it doesn't have to be the whole world. It can be your neighbors. It can be in your community. Reliable, kind at heart. If human beings do that, it changes the world. You change the world one gesture at a time, just as you've described. You already understand. This great Zen master I studied with, Daesung Sunim, this Korean Zen master—sometimes he would look at us and say, "You already understand." And what you've said is so beautiful. You're just remembering that you're only German on your parents' side, and something else knows a lot more. So thank you for that beautiful teaching in your question.

And with this, I think we will call the evening to a close. You've all been a very faithful and kind and attentive group of meditators. I know you well, and I feel your appreciation and love, and the love for one another. Some of you are on Zoom, and you can look in the tiles and see the other people. Send them a little metta and love. Look at their eyes and wish them well. May the child of the spirit be well. And then send it out, because there are people watching on YouTube and Facebook—lots and lots of people. Now you get to send that spirit of joy. May you be joyful in the midst of it all. May your joy increase. May you be truly happy.

Let that sense of open-heartedness go in every direction. You're the beacon of it. You get to choose joy. And the beautiful thing is that we can garden the heart. We can grow what we tend to, and we can become that. This is part of what it means to awaken.

So thank you for your kind attention.

You can wave goodbye or send metta or blessings to one another.

And stay with us. Stay with the joy or beauty, whatever touched you. Keep it, and bring it alive in the days and weeks ahead.

Thank you, and good night to you all.

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