The Compassionate Heart

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 54:45

Welcome back from the break. I took a little break and had a drink and a piece of chocolate, so I'm happy for both of those. And mostly I'm happy that we got to practice together.

I want to remind you that these trainings and practices, like the compassion meditation we just did, need to be individualized. Work within your own heart and mind to find the language and the images that most naturally work for you. Trust yourself in this.

The teachings I'd like to offer tonight are not something you have to remember and take notes for—there's no quiz coming later. They're really a reminder to your heart, to your understanding of things that are important. Listen in that way. If they touch you and remind you of something beautiful, wonderful. If they seem not right or off base, just let them go.

So here we are in May 2021. When we sit and meditate—in general, not just doing the compassion practice, but the practice of mindfulness itself, which the Buddha spoke of as all-helpful—we take our seat in this human form, halfway between heaven and earth. With mindfulness, the point is not to create a special meditative experience. Those may come or may not; they come and go. The point is actually to open to the mystery of our human incarnation—to gaze with the eyes, the inner eyes, and the heart at the unbearable beauty and the ocean of tears that make up human life.

I think we're all especially aware of this in the past year-plus of the pandemic, which in some places is winding down—hallelujah—but in other places is not. I went to see my grandson, who's two and a half years old. It's so shocking. He's used to seeing Baba Jack on a little glass screen on the phone, and all of a sudden I'm a live person. And he is to me—it's like moving from virtual reality to the real thing. It's strange being back again, doing social things with vaccinated friends, still being tentative, trying to figure out how I want to live now after this year-plus of being sequestered.

Sadly, the reality is that the pandemic hasn't ended. I was traveling recently with Trudy and our dear friends Larry and Peerjit Brilliant. He's one of the world's great epidemiologists, working with the WHO and the administration. He made it clear that all the variants emerging in different parts of the world, the unvaccinated people in so many countries that haven't been given vaccines even though we could provide them, the huge spread in India and Brazil and Turkey—this will be with us for a long time. And "us" means us as human beings, because we can't isolate ourselves in one country or one continent and close our doors. We are all connected. We know this, but now the pandemic shows it in bright lights, in an unmistakable way.

But it's not just this huge change. There are the ongoing conflicts. I hear from friends in Burma and Myanmar because I've been engaged in trying to help in modest ways, and the situation is terrible. I hear from friends in Palestine and Israel, and it too is heartbreaking—living under rocket fire on all sides, the cruelty, the barbarity of it. And not just there: Syria, South Sudan, so many places in the world. What are we doing as human beings?

At the same time, there is also the incredibly deep need to sustain the movements for social justice and racial justice. The delusion and suffering from racism and injustice—it's very easy for us to slip back into the unconscious ways that have oppressed so many people and kept so many of us locked in separate consciousness. And I don't need to talk about climate change—or maybe I do, the whole time—but we're woven in that too, in this inescapable garment of destiny, as Dr. King said.

It's not just out there. It's our own personal lives, our own share of the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows: praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, birth and death. I have all these friends who are sick or dying, because I have a big circle of people who've been friends or colleagues or students—and maybe because I'm seventy-five years old and know a lot of other people in my age range. All of this happening.

So then there's a question with it all: How do we find a peaceful heart in the midst of beauty and catastrophe?

Our experience, our human experience, is not a mistake. As William Blake said, joy and woe are woven fine.

a clothing for the soul divine. When this we rightly know, through the world we safely go, for we were made for joy and woe.

There's a passage in Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic writer, that speaks of his visit to Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka in his Asian journals. Polonnaruwa is a temple where huge marble statues of the Buddha—seated and lying down—were carved out of a marble cliff. Giant statues with incredible beauty and a kind of spiritual power that Merton said he'd almost never seen in any other work of art, so powerful they are.

Walking across the green grass up to these statues, he said, "I gazed at these enormous faces and at the eyes of the awakened one, and I could feel in that gaze the consciousness that was seeing it all, seeing every possibility." A peace in the midst of it—the peace not of making an argument with anything, not the peace of emotional resignation, but the eyes of great compassion and of the emptiness that could see all things rising and passing in the space of consciousness itself, in the awakened heart.

It's said in the stories and texts that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he traveled and walked the dusty roads of India for forty-five years—teaching and meeting people, eating and gathering, creating a community. And all the time, he did so in nirvana.

What could that mean? Does that mean nirvana is someplace else? We hear that and think, "Oh, if I go to the Himalayas or have the right meditative experience or take the right substance, I'll get to someplace and that's nirvana." But there he was, trudging through the dusty roads in the rainy season, walking and sitting and speaking, being well and being sick, tending his community—all in nirvana. The compassionate one, the liberated one.

How does this relate to you? To me?

Here's the beginning of an answer, a key to understanding this and what it means for peace of mind and a free heart. And it's a question—maybe a strange question for that: Who are you? Or as Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, "What am I?" That was our practice, to sit and ask, "What am I? What am I?" Who are you? For this is the question of our human mysterious experience.

One of the things that's most remarkable about our human experience—in Buddhist psychology it's one of the key elements to understand—is that consciousness can create an identity that feels separate from the rest. Me, mine, in this head, in this body, in this bag of skin. We believe this is who we are. But the whole sense of identity is up for grabs. You're invited to look, to examine.

Suppose, for example, I hold up my two hands. This hand is me, and this hand is something I'm going to explore. I take this hand and feel it. I notice that one of the nails is a little long and needs to be clipped. The skin back here is a little rough or aging. In this case, this is me, Jack—Baba Jack, as I'm called by Desmond—and this is the object of my attention.

Now I switch and I feel with this hand. Now this is me, and I'm noticing the palm has these creases in it. It feels slightly moist, as if maybe in speaking and talking with you there's some sense—I don't feel anxiety, I really love doing this—but there's some sense that my body's engaged and alive somehow, and it's warm where I am. All of a sudden, it's me feeling this other thing.

We can put our identity anywhere. We can create ourselves in so many ways. But who are you? Who are we?

I remember sitting in a retreat hall with Ram Dass at one point. There was a man who'd come to practice, a quadriplegic lying on a bed that he could move with one hand a little bit to guide himself around. Ram Dass was teaching, and at one point the man indicated he wanted to speak. Someone went over and held the microphone to his mouth, and he said, "Ram Dass says we are not our body. Hallelujah!" You could feel the joy in him to know that he was not that quadriplegic body.

But who are we? Who are you? There are so many roles we identify with. Yes, we can identify with our body. We can identify with our emotions—but the thing is, they keep changing. We can identify with our thoughts, but that's more troublesome.

There are so many of them, and they're going in so many directions. And then we have our roles.

Here's a woman, a physician, a doctor. When she's in the hospital, she's treated as the doctor. But when she gets home, she's not the doctor anymore. She takes off the white coat and the stethoscope. She's mom to her three children—an entirely different role. And then she is a lover or a wife or a partner, another role. And then she calls her parents who are going through a hard time, and all of a sudden she's a daughter. And that week she goes to the school board that she's on, and people look at her: is she a liberal or a conservative? And then they look at her and try to see her ancestors. Are they from India or Nigeria or Ireland? What is her skin color? What is her sign—is she a Virgo, a Libra, a Sagittarius? And she could identify with all or any of these, as you can. But they're temporary, you know. They keep changing. Like water, they change—our roles, our thoughts, our emotions.

Alan Watts wrote a book called *On the Taboo of Not Knowing Who You Really Are*. He wrote about how in this society we're taught to pay attention outwardly, to consume, to compete, to be with others, to act in these ways, to get educated, to be in the drama of society. But we're never taught to turn back inside, to step out of our identities. And this is the place of freedom.

This was the Buddha wandering for forty-five years across India. One of his titles is "the one thus come" or "the one thus gone"—not fixed in any way, but just the openness that came and disappeared. It's a shift to vastness and presence.

Now this sounds kind of philosophical as I'm talking about it, but I want it to be practical and real, because it's a profound invitation to you, to me. Let's do a little meditation practice for twenty seconds that I've done before with you. And here's the instruction: when I say start, I want you to stop or cease being aware. When I say begin, do whatever you can to not be aware. Scrunch your eyes, hold your ears—do whatever you need.

All right. Are you ready? Don't be aware. Begin.

Of course, it becomes clear you can't do it. Because who you are is awareness itself. You are consciousness. You are this loving awareness that was born into this body, that is the witness of emotions that come and go and thoughts, that puts on the roles and identifies with your body in all its phases—when it's a tiny infant and a little child and a middle-aged athlete and an older person. Who you are, my teacher Ajahn Chah called "the one who knows," the knowing itself.

There's a text, a story of someone coming to see the Buddha and asking him a profound question. He says, "You are a Buddha, is that correct?" And the Buddha answers, "Yes, an awakened one." He says, "How can I practice so that I will not be seen by the king of death?" This is a profound question. How do I live so that I will not be subject to death? And the Buddha responds: for one who is not identified with his body and heart and mind—with the physical body, the emotions, the thoughts, perceptions that make up this life—for one who does not take this to be themselves, such a one will not be seen by the king of death.

And in this last week or two, I've tended virtually to a couple of dear ones who were dying, passing away.

And in doing so—they were people who I was very close to—I had the privilege of the last whispered-in-the-ears instructions, even as they lay in a coma in some cases. But you know, people in coma can hear and remember. I've seen it so many times as people wake up and remember what happened. And I would say, let go. Let go into the clear light, into the ocean of love, loving awareness that is who you really are.

You are returning to the source. You've had this incarnation with its blessings, its difficulties. You've completed this and now it's time to let your heart be at peace and let go into the clear, pure light, the ocean of love. To know that who you are is undying, loving awareness itself.

You don't have to wait till you die, because the reality is that we are born every day. Every day at breakfast, you have a new incarnation, every moment. And to see that consciousness, to see the spirit—we'll use that word—that has taken birth in each being is an extraordinary thing.

Thomas Merton again writes so exquisitely about this, coming out of his monastery and walking down the street in the middle of town. He said, all of a sudden, it wasn't the monastery where I was looking for holiness. But in this moment, I could see the secret beauty behind the eyes of everyone walking by. That place of consciousness and love, the child of the spirit that was born into each one of them. They were shining like the stars for me.

What else is there to see but this? To see the beauty behind the eyes. To know that we get to have this human incarnation and its great dance. Who are we really? Who are you? The one listening, the one who knows. When we see in this way, there's an original innocence.

As I've talked about in India, sometimes the description is this: you go to see a great master, whoever she or he might be. And they look at you, and there you are with all your complexity and your pleasures and pains, your longings and hopes, your fears, your shame and desire and greed, your love and creativity and vision. And they look so deeply at you with what is called the glance of mercy, with a love that sees underneath all those layers and roles, looking right into your heart, into that consciousness that you really are, with great love, loving it all. Not caste or race or creed or birth or accomplishments or lack of accomplishments.

"Oh nobly born," the Buddha reminds us—you, me. Oh you who are the sons and daughters of the awakened ones, remember who you really are. Remember your original dignity and beauty.

I love the poem from William Stafford, where he writes of someone, the one line I always mention, where he writes of a person who felt lost in the rain and then remembered: Maybe I'm a king. Maybe I'm a queen. You are, oh nobly born. Remember who you really are.

Now this week is the celebration of Vesak—Vesakapuja it's called. In the Theravada tradition from which our mindfulness training comes, from Burma and Sri Lanka and Thailand and Laos and Cambodia, it celebrates the birth, the enlightenment, and the death of the Buddha all on the same day. A very tidy way

to live a life, to be born and die enlightened on the same day.

I've always been curious why it would be celebrated this way. And I believe it's celebrated this way because we're always being born and always dying—each day, each moment. We're reborn anew in this mysterious, timeless human life. We take birth, take a new identity for a time, and then it passes away. And so our birth and death and our freedom or enlightenment are here, just where we are. As they were for the Buddha, as he walked across India in the state of freedom and nirvana.

Okay, beautiful poetry. But how does this really help? We've just gone through tax season. We still have to wear a mask some of the time, or we don't know who's vaccinated and who's not—should we wear a mask? We have teenagers in our family who are struggling more than teenagers usually did through the pandemic. We invested in cryptocurrency and it just tanked for the week. Our marriage has gotten a little bit stale, or we feel estranged from a friend. We feel guilty because we're not doing enough for the people with COVID in India or Brazil, enough for those most hard hit by the pandemic. We have all these things that weigh on our hearts and that we have to deal with.

How do we do it?

I remember this Peanuts cartoon. There's Charlie Brown lying in his bed saying, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and ask, where have I gone wrong?" And then a voice says to him, "This is going to take more than one night." You know, that great humor of Charles Schultz.

So here's the story. There was an ardent young monk who practiced day and night in order to get enlightened. He struggled and struggled and nothing happened. And finally he decided, I just have to get out of the monastery.

And he'd heard there was some wise old hermit at the top of the mountains. So he began to walk the trails that went way into the mountains. And there, partway up, he saw an old wise woman walking down the path, carrying a great bundle. He realized she was the one he'd heard about, this sage.

He asked her, "I've been struggling and searching for enlightenment. Do you know anything of this?"

She gazed at him with great tender eyes and dropped her bundle on the ground. Just let it go. Whatever you want. Whoever you are. Whatever you imagine. Just let go and be.

And in his case, it was the right moment. He realized what we all can learn—that he could let it go. Not try to be something. Not even look for enlightenment. But just to be.

Then he looked at her and said, "So now what?"

She reached down, picked up the bundle, and continued to walk down toward town. The paintings that are done of this wise sage in different forms show her entering the marketplace with what are called bliss-bestowing hands, going into the shops and speaking with people and being part of the community.

All that she does, all that she touches, is with a free and loving heart.

So yes, we are this loving awareness itself. And yes, we have this human life. Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master, puts it this way: "You're perfect just as you are, and there's still room for improvement." One of those brilliant statements by a wise Zen master.

From the place of the one who knows, you become the witness to it all. You remember vastness. Like the woman I worked with who had to go home to her family in Illinois, to the old family home, because her father had Alzheimer's and her mother, who was taking care of him, had fallen and broken her hip. The house was a wreck when she got there, and she realized they couldn't live there anymore. She had to move them out—all those struggles. She began to weep for her parents and the loss. It was her childhood home.

Then she walked out into the hills near her family home and got to the hilltop. In the daytime she could see her house and the neighborhood and the farmland stretched around and the cumulus clouds in the sky and the vastness of that Midwestern landscape. She became quiet and tender inside.

As she breathed, she realized she wasn't the only one whose parents were aging. She wasn't the only one whose life was in change. She could feel that she was part of thousands of others who loved and cared for their parents even as they aged, even as they needed new levels of help, even as they had to let go—all of them together—of the way that it was, to make room for the next moment and the next thing.

She realized, "Ah, I'm not alone in this. This is the human incarnation. This is human life itself, with its joys and its sorrows and its seasons." She could see with the eyes of wisdom, the one who knows.

So you see in this way, and then you go back and mop the floor. You tend the people around you with care and a loving heart. You do it beautifully. We learned this in the monastery—that you took care with your bowl and your robes and all the things that were given to you, and you swept the path beautifully. Not in order to have a clean path, but to express the care and love that you had learned, even as you became vast in your consciousness, in your heart. The goal being to be where you are with inner freedom and love.

And then again, as William Blake said, "If one is to do good, it must be done in the minute particulars. General good is the plea of the hypocrite, the flatterer, and the scoundrel."

So you know who you are underneath it all—under all those robes and roles and thoughts and feelings. You become the one who knows.

And then you enter with caring and bliss-bestowing hands.

As we get toward the end of this talk—though there's still a bit of a ways to go—I want to speak about a book I've been reading called *Novice to Master*, the story of Soko Morinaga, who became a great Zen master and died in the 1990s. He trained in the Rinzai Zen tradition.

After World War II, his parents died not long after the war's end, and the whole society was in tremendous upheaval. He didn't know what to do. So he decided to enter a Zen monastery to understand himself and the world.

He went to work in the garden of the monastery because after he bowed and was received, Master Zuigan said, "You're here, you need to help." Morinaga asked, "What can I do?" And Zuigan said, "Clean the garden."

So he raked all the leaves—there were many fallen leaves from a storm that had passed. He raked them into a big pile and tended the paths, and he was rather proud of himself because it looked so good. He called the Roshi and asked, "Where should I put this trash?"—referring to the pile of leaves and twigs he'd gathered.

The Roshi shouted at him, which is part of that Rinzai tradition: "There is no trash! There is no trash!" Then the Roshi looked at him and said, "You don't believe me. Here's what I want you to do. Go and get a big sack and take all the leaves out of this pile because we'll use them to make a fire under the hot bath that the monks use."

So he brought the bag and removed all the leaves. But underneath remained a big pile of stones and clods of earth. He thought, surely this is useless. And the master said, "Now, sort out and pick out all the stones, because with the great rains coming down the rain spouts from the building, the stones have been dislodged." With a whole basket of stones, he was directed to place them back and repair where they'd been dislodged until everything was perfectly smooth and the rainwater could flow easily.

He went back and saw the master, then picked up all the sand and clods of dirt in another basket. He walked along the path looking for small depressions and dips where at night, if one wasn't careful, one might fall or misstep. He placed them carefully, one after another.

When it was done and nothing remained of the pile, the master paused with him and said, "From the first, in people and in things, there's no such thing as trash."

What a teaching. What a beautiful teaching. In people and in things, there's no such thing as trash. There's just this world that we have to tend in our way.

The story of Morinaga Roshi is primarily one of very hard training—poor food, little sleep, a tremendous amount of surrender over years—until gradually, with all his self-doubt and insecurity and grief and stupidity, he learned to accept himself and feel confident in his true self. The subtitle of the book is "An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity." So it's not just my word, but his.

At the end of the book, at the end of his Zen journey and story, he speaks of an older woman named Miss Okamoto. When she was forty years old, she'd come to the monastery wanting to serve in whatever way she could. Yes, she would meditate, sit with a koan, but she took it upon herself to wash the robes of the

master and the senior monks. She took it upon herself to plant and tend the garden beds, to pickle the vegetables, to cook. She was incredibly devoted to the monastery. Her practice was working from morning to night, serving in a very dedicated and full way.

She lived a strict and upright life such that when the young novices were sent to talk to Miss Okamoto, they were a little scared of her because she was so intent and serious.

Then in her seventies, she called to the Zen master. By then Zuigan had died and Morinaga had become the master of the temple. She said, "You know, I've asked very little of you. But I'm terrified because I was told I have metastatic cancer. I'm grateful for these teachings, but I realize I must have failed because I'm really afraid. I'm afraid of dying. How have I gone wrong? How have I gone wrong?"

And now I will read you some excerpts from Morinaga's description of his work with her. It's more than I usually read in a talk, but there's something so compelling about it that I hope it will be for you as well.

"Although Miss Okamoto, who beseeched me, was twenty-four years my elder, her earnest confession prompted me to bluntly call her attention to something that had been weighing on my mind about her. This woman had led a flawless, commendable life, but she had always stoically gritted her teeth in an effort to do good and avoid evil. Sharply distinguishing between good and bad, forever sizing up and passing judgment on every situation, she went about her endeavors to do better—but with her teeth clenched fast.

"I explained to Miss Okamoto: You come from your mother's womb and leave in your coffin. The time in between you call life. And perhaps you think going into your coffin is death, but true existence is birth and death all the time. Our lives appear to be unbroken blocks, but if you look at a candle flame, which seems to burn continuously, actually the wax is burning down bit by bit, and the wick that blazes is passing as the flame moves down. When you understand this, you realize that you are a wife, a husband, a spouse, a neighbor next door. You have these roles, and you notice that you are born again and again. You die in each instant and get born again.

"I told Miss Okamoto: When you go to the kitchen to prepare dinner, be born in the kitchen. When you finish there, die. When you are born at the dining table, as you eat your dinner, be born, and when you finish eating, die there. When you go to bed at night, die there. And when you wake up fresh, be born anew. And if you have cancer, be born with cancer.

"I've seen many people in practice over the years. I do not know of anyone who so splendidly and thoroughly took my instructions to heart. It wasn't even ten days before her rigid countenance had softened into a baby face, into the face of a sweet old lady. She'd been given permission to leave behind the lifestyle in which she had to grit her teeth and try to live right.

"Miss Okamoto's disease grew progressively worse and she was finally hospitalized. I remember that when I called on her, the doctors and nurses all remarked that though they'd worked in the hospital for

many years, they had never encountered a patient like this one. For by this time she had entered the hospital, she was greeting everyone and everything, every scene, in the spirit of one chance, one encounter.

"One chance, one encounter may occur when one encounters a stone, when one comes upon a weed, when one is cleaning the bathroom or cooking rice. It refers to the state of heart and mind in which one makes absolutely no projections of favorability or adversity, but meets life as it is.

"Not long before Miss Okamoto died, as I was tending to her, she looked up and said, 'I've led a pretty stuffy life all these years. So I think I'll just take a ball and go out and play in the woods. Play in the woods now.' These were her last words. And we, the monks of the temple, placed a beautiful ball of colored threads inside her grave."

This story really touches me because we've tried so hard. And it's not that it isn't important to practice—any good musician knows how you need to practice. But when you become a good musician and you keep practicing, you do it for the joy of it. You practice for the pleasure of it. So as Suzuki Roshi says, yes, there's room for improvement—but not as a goal, not as a judgment. Rather, out of the delight of being alive and being able to attend and develop and open to compassion, tenderness, and understanding.

You have within you this loving awareness, this loving presence, and there's no trash. Nothing that cannot be treated with dignity and respect. And then you learn that meditation and mindfulness is not passive but a way of tending the garden of the earth. You honor your true nature. You honor the birth and death and enlightenment of the Buddha within yourself, this Vesak.

I think of a woman who worked in juvenile hall. Her own mother had died when she was quite young, nine years old. Her sister was eight. Their mother died of cancer. And before she died, she sewed a beautiful little doll. One of the last things she did for her children, the two daughters, was to take the doll and cut it in half. She said, "I've given life to both of you. You were in me and I am in you. I'm always a part of you." And she put this in their hands.

So here this woman was later, one of those girls grown up, working in juvenile hall. There were girls there, young women who were depressed and suicidal, who'd been through terrible things—abused and mistreated culturally and in their families, harming themselves. On her last day working with them, she got a big piece of paper and made a big paper doll. She'd been with the girls for some months. Then she cut it into six parts and gave a part to each one of them, saying, "I've come to know you and I've come to love you, and I want you to know that I'm with you."

You can always carry this.

And a year later, she received a letter from one of those girls saying, "I went back and finished high school. I'm about to go to community college now. Yes, I felt terrible at times. I thought sometimes of the worst—of killing myself. And then I would take out the part of the doll you gave me and know you were

with me."

In spite of your regrets, your own share of sorrows and struggles, you too are always held—like these girls, held by love, held by the dharma, held by the universe that you cannot fall out of. And of course, we all have times that we forget. But the one who knows in us, the loving witness, knows that what matters in the end is integrity and generosity, reaching out with care, and not holding on so tightly as things are born and die.

This is the inner Vesak—being reborn as the one who knows. And it allows you to enter this world with a free heart.

Here is one last teaching from Morinaga:

If a person is working for wages, shoveling sand onto the bed of a truck, they may get tired. Should someone happen along and offer to help them out, they will most likely be glad to hand over the shovel. But suppose a child is playing in a sand pile, scooping sand into a bucket and then pouring it back out. Should someone walk up and offer to take over for a while, the child would balk at such foolishness. "Why should I want you to take over when I'm having so much fun?"

Even the most fleeting of activities—the business of preparing a meal or cleaning the community hall or tending what is around you—can be what I call the samadhi of play, bringing your awakening alive from moment to moment.

Yes, we need to practice to remember courage and tenderness, to use those skillful means to remind us, so we can quiet our mind and tend our heart. And remember that who you are is the awakened one—herself, himself, the Blessed One. You are loving awareness, witnessing the dance of this life. And from this place of freedom, from awareness itself, you reach out and tend the garden of this world beautifully.

So take a moment just to settle with these words. It's not about improving yourself, but living with joy.

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