Q&A: The Compassionate Heart

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 14:48

And now I would welcome a few questions.

Linda, go ahead with your question.

"I hear everything you said this evening. I have a good friend who's not a Buddhist, who's not a meditator. She's only 63, and she's dying from stage four colon cancer that's metastasized. She wants desperately to live on. I'm wondering what, if anything, I could offer her. She's been a teacher for 25 years, tending to other people's children—the children she never had herself. And she wants so desperately to live. I couldn't go in and say to her, just let it go and walk into the clear light. I don't know what to say to her. What would you say to someone who wasn't coming from the same philosophical understanding that might offer words of comfort, letting her know that with a heart of great compassion, you care about her?"

This is such an important question. And it points to something really beautiful: you already know the answer within your question. This isn't the time to tell her to let go. Remember that common saw that says timing is everything?

I remember a woman who had metastatic brain cancer and was doing all kinds of things to heal herself. It had gotten worse. She did ninety days of a carrot juice fast. She went to see the experts on dying and healing. She did every possible thing, and she was just getting worse. Then she came to a retreat with a great old master who was visiting us from Burma. She went to see him, and I thought he would give her the end-of-life instructions to go into the light.

He listened to her as your friend spoke. And he said, "What is it that matters to you?" She said, "I want to live." And he said, "Great. Here's a practice of sending love into your brain through compassion and loving-kindness. Here's a special herbal remedy that I know from the jungles of Burma. Here are some teachings for you. Let me hold your hand and feel the courage that I impart to you. Do everything you can to stay alive."

I was really surprised when he said that. It turned out she lived two and a half years longer. They had told her she had a month to go. No one knows when it is time for someone to die. Then, when it was time, her head turned from this life to the next.

Your question, which is such a deep one, has in it your own intelligence and wisdom. That's not what she needs to hear now. She needs to have you hold her hand if you're with her in person and love her. Say to her, "You have a great, courageous spirit. Do all you can. How can I help you to stay alive as long as you can and make your days as full and beautiful as you can?"

Only when it's time—maybe at the very end, if you have the privilege of being with her and the privilege of being asked—then at that moment, you might say to her as a dear one, "Now it's time, and you can let go into the ocean of love that is who you really are."

I love that you already know this, and that you can trust that in yourself.

Thank you, Linda.

Padma, you can unmute and ask your question.

I just want to say hello, Jack. I wanted to share that this teaching is coming to me in the moment when I need it. More than asking a question, I wanted to make an observation.

Please.

I was taking care of a seventy-four-year-old today. Part of the care was to give her blood. She had metastatic cancer. And I was seeing myself—there was so much agitation in me from before we went into the procedure, before she was having surgery. I had this judgment in my heart that I wished she chose to let go. Why is she having this surgery? Why is she doing all this? And it's not in my hands, and I am part of her care.

At some point, right in the middle of the second unit of transfusion, I simply let go. And I said, you know what? This is what she wants. She already clearly said she was not ready to go. I need to do everything to just offer the prayer to let her get through this and come out to whatever it is that she's looking for.

And to hear all this—between you and Linda, this conversation—it's just really overwhelming for me. I just wanted to acknowledge that. It is amazing to me how, if we open our heart, we can stop the judgment and then be with the person for whatever they want in life, however they want it. We may not see it. We may not understand it. We may choose differently. But those we love, those we care for—this is what they want. This is who they are.

There were many times in my past when I didn't understand that. I gave my loved ones such a hard time about the choices they were making, because I knew what the right choice was. And I really am very grateful to you for bringing that up. And thank you, Linda. That's all.

Thank you so much. Thank you also for all the care that you give and tend to people. It's not an easy thing. It asks a kind of profound spiritual practice to be able to be present as you describe, and just the wisdom that you offer. I don't want to say any more. It's gorgeous. Thank you.

Thank you.

Louisa, you can unmute and ask your question.

Hello.

Hello, Jack. Hello, everyone.

Hi, Louisa.

I'm just coming out of a week-long retreat, and joy came up so much. In the end it was an online retreat. We all brought our pets and the things that we love—our Buddha statues and our plants. And I just think this talk is so amazing as far as this integration goes back to reality. It was so beautiful to give myself that week of pause and reset, just this looking for joy as embodied awareness and attention to every moment, trying to find the joy in everything. So I just wanted to thank you for this beautiful talk and synchronicity, and for fitting right into my week-long teachings.

It's beautiful. Can you share any more of what was most important for you that you learned in that retreat, or that touched you?

It was a lot about openness and letting go. It was a Mahasati retreat—my first time trying that practice. It's definitely quite heady in some ways, but it's really about letting go at the same time. There were many embodied practices as well, a lot of nervous system regulation. I think this is especially important in a year where we've been so taxed with our own trauma and the collective trauma. It's really essential to be able to bring our nervous systems down and embody ourselves in a grounded way. So that was another significant aspect. It was interesting to dip my toes into the Mahasati approach—pretty interesting stuff, for sure.

One last thing: let your eyes close just for a moment. Feel the joy and the understanding, the embodied wisdom and joy that you carry from this retreat. Let yourself sense and imagine that you can bring this alive, that you can carry this for days and weeks and months, that it can be how you are and how you live. It's not the retreat. No, it's you, Luisa. How does that feel?

It feels amazing right now. I definitely feel like I'm loving awareness right now.

Beautiful. Thank you.

Hopefully I can keep it up, but I'll keep practicing.

Well, you know, it doesn't actually take very much. Sometimes just five minutes of pausing and sitting and saying, "Oh yeah, let me tune in again. Let me remember. I had a busy morning." Because it's right there. And it is who you are.

Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Take a breath, everyone. Perhaps this is the end of questions and dialogue for the evening, which is just fine. Things have their own rhythm.

I'm glad I got to share these stories with you. You know I'm a storyteller—it makes me happy to tell a good story. And then to read a story like Morinaga's, even though that's more than I would normally read, I was so captivated by the tale of him saying there is no such thing as trash, that no one should be discarded, that nothing should be discarded, but all honored. And then to tell the story of Ms. Okamoto and what it means to shift from a spiritual life of grim duty to one of play and joy, of bringing loving awareness wherever we are.

So dear ones, this is the message of Vesak, of the birth and death and enlightenment—the gift of your own life, what you can live. Trust yourself. Pay attention in a kind way. Nurture what's beautiful. Practice not to get something or gain something, but to let your love and wisdom shine.

Thank you. Good night.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.