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JACK KORNFIELD

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER
OF INTENTION

INTENTION ISSUE

JOE DISPENZA ON BECOMING SUPERNATURAL
LYNNE MCTAGGART ON THE POWER OF EIGHT

LISTENING IN WITH ... JACK KORNFIELD



Folding Our
BEST INTENTION

JACK KORNFIELD, PH.D., IS WELL-KNOWN NOT ONLY FOR BEING AMONG THE FIRST TO BRING BUDDHIST MINDFULNESS MEDITATION TO THE UNITED STATES, BUT ALSO FOR COMBINING THOSE TEACHINGS WITH PSYCHOTHERAPY PRACTICES TO BRIDGE EASTERN AND WESTERN

PHILOSOPHIES. ORDAINED IN THAILAND AS A BUDDHIST MONK IN HIS MID-TWENTIES, KORNFIELD LATER EARNED A DOCTORAL DEGREE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND HAS TAUGHT MEDITATION WORLDWIDE SINCE 1974. HE IS THE COFOUNDER OF BOTH THE INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY

IN BARRE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND OF SPIRIT ROCK MEDITATION CENTER IN WOODACRE, CALIFORNIA, WHERE HE NOW LIVES. HERE, KORNFIELD TALKS WITH *UNITY* MAGAZINE EDITOR **KATY KOONTZ** ABOUT INTENTION, ENLIGHTENMENT, AND SWEEPING THE GARDEN.

Katy Koontz:

In *The Wise Heart*, you wrote about aligning our dedication with our highest intention as a way of staying focused instead of being discouraged when things go wrong. How does that work?

Jack Kornfield: The secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of the actions. It is not given to us to determine outcome—only to plant seeds of goodness, acting with the highest intention of our heart. Sometimes those intentions are fulfilled as we wish. Sometimes the fruits are not visible or seem to even make more trouble. As Christian contemplative Thomas Merton explains, “As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself,” knowing that in the long-term if you’ve planted good seeds you can expect good results.

KK: I love how you worded it in the book: “Setting a long-term intention is like setting the compass of our heart.”

JK: This setting of the heart’s intention is a beautiful act in meditation. We can quiet ourselves and ask deeply, *If I were to set the compass of my heart toward a north star for this life, what would it be?* When you take time to reflect in this way, the heart will answer. It can be very simple: “I vow to be kind,” or “I vow to bring the best of myself to the world and to encourage the best from others,” or “I vow to speak truth out of love for all.” The power of these deep, long-term intentions is immeasurable.

This becomes quite practical. When things get confusing or sticky or when you’re getting ready to start something

important, you can pause, take a breath or two, and ask yourself, *What is my best intention?* If you’re in an argument, often the heart will answer, “I want to find a way to make this work for all of us.” When you connect with your highest intention, the tone of your voice changes and the conversation goes in a very different direction, inviting a very different response.

KK: Is this what you meant when you wrote in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (possibly the best book title of all time) that asking from our wisest intention often yields a surprising effect?

JK: Nelson Mandela said it never hurts to see the good in a person because they often act better because of it. That happens because we are then connected from a place of our common care. When other people feel our love and concern, it often elicits that response in them.

Compassion and connection are part of our DNA. Our consciousness is not only tuned to one another but actually linked, as we see in the growing field of interpersonal neurobiology. Many people report having a strong feeling that a close friend or family member has had an accident or died even before we found out it actually happened. That’s because we are a field of consciousness that manifests as you and me in these separate incarnations, but in fact is completely united. The paradox is that while we need to remember our connection with all of life, we also have to remember our zip code. Our life is both individual, which deserves respect, and connected to all at the same time.

KK: Long before #MeToo and #TimesUp, you were a strong advocate

of honoring the feminine, specifically in Buddhism. What sparked that?

JK: The Buddhist training I received was life-changing, but its outer form was male-dominated. When I returned from Asia and started to teach here in the mid-’70s with Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and others, women began to complain that all our references to masters of the past and present were to men and that our teachings were patriarchal.

I realized this was an oppression of all the women present. From then on, I’ve worked with others to support and empower women teachers, and now our Buddhist communities have as many (or more) fine women teachers as men. Women bring in the feminine elements of interconnection, community, and tending to the emotional life. To support and encourage those qualities to flower has been a beautiful ride. This is the direction of a wise spirituality, a mutually caring, healthy, and balanced masculine and feminine that the world needs more than ever.

KK: Didn’t the Dalai Lama say he might come back as a woman in his next life?

JK: He did, and I hope it’s true. That would make me laugh with delight!

KK: You are an activist and a Buddhist. Activists, by definition, are concerned with doing, while Buddhist philosophy seems to be all about being. How do you reconcile those two?

JK: That’s a mischaracterization of Buddhist teachings, which in fact involve both inner and outer mindfulness. In Zen, they say there are only two things: You sit and you sweep

the garden. In meditation you first quiet your mind and tend your heart, then you naturally reach your hands out to touch those places given to you to make a difference.

Each of us has a gift to bring to this earth. It may be to raise a conscious child or develop a conscious business. It may be to stand up for those who are vulnerable by working as a political activist. It may be to protect the earth as an environmentalist. You sit and you sweep the garden. It's like breathing in and breathing out.

KK: You became both a monk and a psychologist. How does psychology enrich the practice of Buddhism?

JK: When I came back from training as a monk, I studied psychology so I could better understand what the heck happened to me in those monasteries. I had learned practices of forgiveness, compassion and loving-kindness, and mindfulness, but I realized I still had to learn how to embody those principles in relationships, work, and community. I also discovered I still carried the pain from my family history as well as other painful patterns in intimate relationships—pain that had not been worked out in a monastery. I still carried fears, needs, and judgments that had never been activated in the monastery but came back as a layperson.

Western psychology teaches the tools of therapy, which at its best is a kind of paired mindfulness in which someone helps you become more attentive and compassionate toward your own inner life. I also learned Western trauma work, which releases the deep traumas held in the body, heart, and mind. These

were a beautiful complement to the trainings I received in the East.

During the past several decades I have been a bridge for many, offering the transformative heart trainings from Buddhist practice and integrating them in a modern way with the wisdom of Western psychotherapy.

KK: The concept of embodied enlightenment you teach incorporates Western psychology into a daily spiritual practice. How does that work?

IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER TO TEND TO OUR OWN HEARTS AND BECOME A ZONE OF WELL-BEING AND PEACE.

JK: Sometimes we think we have to go to a secluded, exotic spiritual place and after many, many, years we will become enlightened. But it's not there. The conditions of praise and blame, gain and loss, joy and sorrow, and birth and death that we experience are the perfect conditions for awakening wisdom and compassion. Embodied enlightenment means that our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and our relationships are the places where we awaken.

Sometimes people do a spiritual bypass. They make prayers or meditate in order to rise above the

troubles of the world. But in focusing on their spiritual ideals they may not be paying attention to the people they live with or their own bodies or the traumas or emotions they carry. Instead, they're using their spiritual practice to avoid the messiness and real love that is part of human life. To truly awaken requires us to tend to our bodies, our emotions, our thoughts, and our relationships in the same way we tend to our spirit.

KK: Is that what you mean when you say enlightenment is fairly common?

JK: I prefer the word *awakening* to *enlightenment* because *enlightenment* is loaded with a lot of fantasies and idealization. We've all had moments of stepping outside of our small, separate sense of self—what's called the body of fear—and connecting with the field of consciousness and love. It might be walking in the mountains, listening to a magnificent piece of music in a great cathedral, staring at the ocean, or being present at the birth of a child. It might be the mysterious moment sitting with someone who is dying when the spirit leaves their body and the gates between the worlds open. It might be making love or dancing.

Those moments when we remember who we really are have happened to almost all of us. And then our meditation is not a practice of reaching for enlightenment in some other place, but rather quieting our mind, opening our hearts, and remembering that this is who we really are.

KK: I love the idea of using the word *awakening* instead of *enlightenment* because it feels more alive. It's a movement, a progression, instead of a matter of on/off or yes/no.

JK: Another way to see it is that you're not going somewhere else. There is

only the timeless present. Awakening is either found here and now, or never.

KK: I know that you like to look for synergy and see how the pieces fit together. That gives me a rush too. How can we encourage more synergy or is our challenge merely in recognizing it more often because it's already there?

JK: The Universe wants to collaborate with us. That's its nature. Darwin understood that. People see Darwin's work on evolution as being about the combat for the dominance of a species, but as Darwin wrote quite extensively, networks of collaboration and compassion are built into evolution. We are designed this way and would die otherwise.

Think of the food we eat, which is usually grown by someone else, and the medicines we use, many of which have been developed for thousands of years from ancient China, ancient Greece, and ancient Africa. All of this is life cooperating with us. So you're right—sensing this allows us to be more attuned to it, allowing this field of interconnection to grow stronger as we open to it. Globally we need to honor our interdependence if we are to preserve our environment and create a peaceful world.

KK: You've said that self-judgment and unworthiness, thinking we haven't progressed enough along our spiritual path, are peculiar to Western culture and that mindset doesn't exist in the East. Why are we like that?

JK: In the 1980s, I was part of a group of Western teachers who asked the Dalai Lama about self-judgment and self-hatred. He couldn't understand the question because there's no word in Tibetan for self-hatred. We live in a culture that holds enormous

expectations for us from the very beginning. Embedded in those expectations is a tremendous amount of judgment. We compare ourselves to magazine covers of airbrushed models and fall short. We read about great success stories and think we haven't really succeeded. We internalize the judgments and the criticism of our parents and teachers. We are certain something is wrong with us but nothing is fundamentally wrong with any of us.

When someone you respect looks deeply at you through the eyes of total love, and does not see you as imperfect but as a magical display of life itself, it can change everything. The heart of spiritual practice is the ability to see ourselves and others with this pure perception of beauty.

When Nelson Mandela walked out of prison after 27 years with so much graciousness, magnanimity, forgiveness, and wisdom, he not only changed South Africa, he changed the imagination of the world. They can put your body in prison but no one can imprison your spirit. Spiritual practice is a way of freeing ourselves from that prison of self-judgment and separation and returning to the web of love that is who we really are.

KK: How do you remain so hopeful in the face of all the conflict in the world?

JK: We need to have a positive vision for the future because how we intend and imagine in our own hearts and minds is what we become. I don't mean this in the simplistic sense that you think a beautiful thought and so you win the lottery. The human condition—whether love or hate, conflict or compassion—is always born in the human heart. We have an enormous creative capacity, and it is possible for us to envision living together harmoniously.

There is a life force that is born in us that is our collective consciousness, and as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I believe it also bends toward awakening and remembering our interconnection as a human family, in spite of all our current difficulties.

KK: Is nonjudgment part of what enables you to carry that hope, as opposed to diving in to the horrible news story of the day?

JK: It's important not to let the terror outside take over and terrorize our hearts. In a day with a news story of school shootings or mass deportations or other bad news, there were also 10 billion acts of kindness around the earth that weren't reported. Yes, the problems on the news are very real and need our love, compassion, and action, but they're only a small part of the great human story.

If we are to live in these highly wired and connected times, it's more important than ever to tend to our own hearts and become a zone of well-being and peace. Then because we care, we can act calmly and powerfully in the world and make a huge difference without adding to the fear and confusion. Instead, our actions will be spread from interconnection, kinship, and love. 🌍

Jack Kornfield, Ph.D., is the author of more than 15 books that have sold more than a million copies worldwide and have been translated into 21 languages. His latest book is *No Time Like the Present* (Atria Books, 2017). In January, he and Tara Brach will begin teaching a mindfulness teacher certification course through Sounds True. Visit jackkornfield.com and spiritrock.org.