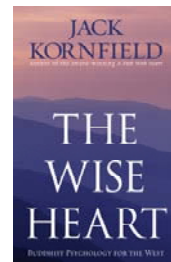




RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

THE WISE HEART
by Jack Kornfield

Format: Paperback
ISBN: 9781846041259
Imprint: Rider
Released in July, 2008



INTRODUCTION

Last year I joined with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh to co-lead a conference on mindfulness and psychotherapy at UCLA. As I stood at the podium looking over a crowd of almost two thousand people, I wondered what had drawn so many to this three-day gathering. Was it the need to take a deep breath and find a wiser way to cope with the conflict, stress, fears, and exhaustion so common in modern life? Was it the longing for a psychology that included the spiritual dimension and the highest human potential in its vision of healing? Was it a hope to find simple ways to quiet the mind and open the heart?

I found that I had to speak personally and practically, as I do in this book. These conference participants wanted the same inspiration and support as the students who come to Spirit Rock Meditation Center near San Francisco. Those who enter our light-filled meditation hall are not running away from life, but seeking a wise path through it. They each bring their personal problems and their genuine search for happiness. Often they carry a burden of concern for the world, with its continuing warfare and ever-deepening environmental problems. They wonder what will be left for their children's generation. They have heard about meditation and hope to find the joy and inner freedom that Buddhist teachings promise, along with a wiser way to care for the world.

Forty years ago, I arrived at a forest monastery in Thailand in search of my own happiness. A confused, lonely young man with a painful family history, I had graduated from Dartmouth College in Asian studies and asked the Peace Corps to send me to a Buddhist country. Looking back, I can see that I was trying to escape not only my family pain but also the materialism and suffering—so evident in the Vietnam War—of our culture at large. Working on rural health and medical teams in the provinces along the Mekong River, I heard about a meditation master, Ajahn Chah, who welcomed Western students. I was full of ideas and hopes that Buddhist teachings would help me, maybe even lead me to become enlightened. After months of visits to Ajahn Chah's monastery, I took monk's vows. Over the next three years I was introduced to the practices of mindfulness, generosity, loving-kindness, and integrity, which are at the heart of Buddhist training. That was the beginning of a lifetime journey with Buddhist teachings.

Like Spirit Rock today, the forest monastery received a stream of visitors. Every day, Ajahn Chah would sit on a wooden bench at the edge of a clearing and greet them all: local rice farmers and devout pilgrims, seekers and soldiers, young people, government ministers from the capital, and Western students. All brought their spiritual questions and conflicts, their sorrows, fears, and aspirations. At one moment Ajahn Chah would be gently holding the head of a man whose young son had just died, at another laughing with a disillusioned shopkeeper at the arrogance of humanity. In the morning he might be teaching ethics to a

Extract from THE WISE HEART by Jack Kornfield

Available in bookshops July, 2008

ISBN: 9781846041259 | Imprint: Rider | Publisher: Random House Australia



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

semi- corrupt government official, in the afternoon offering a meditation on the nature of undying consciousness to a devout old nun.

Even among these total strangers, there was a remarkable atmosphere of safety and trust. All were held by the compassion of the master and the teachings that guided us together in the human journey of birth and death, joy and sorrow. We sat together as one human family.

Ajahn Chah and other Buddhist masters like him are practitioners of a living psychology: one of the oldest and most welldeveloped systems of healing and understanding on the face of the earth. This psychology makes no distinction between worldly and spiritual problems. To Ajahn Chah, anxiety, trauma, financial problems, physical difficulties, struggles with meditation, ethical dilemmas, and community conflict were all forms of suffering to be treated with the medicine of Buddhist teaching. He was able to respond to the wide range of human troubles and possibilities from his own deep meditation, and also from the vast array of skillful means passed down by his teachers. Sophisticated meditative disciplines, healing practices, cognitive and emotional trainings, conflict resolution techniques—he used them all to awaken his visitors to their own qualities of integrity, equanimity, gratitude, and forgiveness.

The wisdom Ajahn Chah embodied as a healer also exists as an ancient written tradition, first set down as a record of the Buddha’s teachings and then expanded by more than a hundred generations of study, commentary, and practice. This written tradition is a great storehouse of wisdom, a profound exploration of the human mind, but it is not easily accessible to Westerners.

At this moment, a winter rainstorm is drenching my simple writer’s cabin in the woods above Spirit Rock. On my desk are classic texts from many of the major historic schools of Buddhism: the Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, the eight- thousand- verse “large version” of the Heart Sutra, with its teachings on form and emptiness, and a Tibetan text on consciousness by Longchenpa. Over time, I have learned to treasure these texts and know that they are filled with jewels of wisdom. Yet the Abhidhamma (or Abhidharma in Sanskrit), considered the masterwork of the early Theravada tradition and the ultimate compendium of Buddhist psychology, is also one of the most impenetrable books ever written. What are we to make of passages such as, “The inseparable material phenomena constitute the pure octad; leading to the dodecad of bodily intimation and the lightness triad; all as material groups originating from consciousness”? And the Heart Sutra, revered as a sacred text of Mahayana Buddhism in India, China, and Japan, can sound like a mixture of fantastical mythology and nearly indecipherable Zen puzzles. In the same way, for most readers, analyzing the biochemistry of a lifesaving drug might be as easy as deciphering some of Longchenpa’s teachings on self- existent empty primal cognition.

What we are all seeking is the experience that underlies these texts, which is rich and deep and joyfully free. When Laura arrives at Spirit Rock with her cancer diagnosis, or Sharon, the judge, comes to learn about forgiveness, each wants the pith, the heart understanding that illuminates these words. But how to find it?

Like my teacher Ajahn Chah, I’ve tried to convey the essence of these texts as a living, immediate, and practical psychology. I have become part of a generation of Buddhist elders that includes Pema Chödrön, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others who have helped to introduce Buddhist teachings widely in the West. To do this

Extract from THE WISE HEART by Jack Kornfield

Available in bookshops July, 2008

ISBN: 9781846041259 | Imprint: Rider | Publisher: Random House Australia



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

while remaining true to our own roots, we have primarily focused on the core teachings, the essence of Buddhist wisdom that spans all traditions. Though this is a role different from that of more orthodox and scholarly Buddhists, it is central to bringing Buddhist teachings to a new culture. It has been a way of forging a non- sectarian and accessible approach to these remarkable teachings. This is what another of my teachers, Ajahn Buddhadasa, encouraged: not dividing the teachings into the schools of Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana, but offering Buddhayana, the core living principles of awakening.

As a parallel to these essential Buddhist teachings, I also bring in important insights from our Western psychological tradition. My interest in Western psychology began after I returned from Asia and encountered problems that had not come up in the monastery. I had difficulties with my girlfriend, with my family, with money and livelihood, with making my way as a young man in the world. I discovered that I could not use silent meditation alone to transform my problems. There was no shortcut, no spiritual bypass that could spare me from the work of integration and day- to- day embodiment of the principles I had learned in meditation.

To complement my Buddhist practice, I entered graduate school in psychology and sought out practice and training in a variety of therapeutic approaches: Reichian, analytic, Gestalt, psychodrama, Jungian. I became part of a growing dialogue between Eastern and Western psychology as I worked with innovative colleagues in the early years of Naropa Buddhist University and Esalen Institute and at meditation centers and professional conferences around the world. Gradually, this dialogue has become more fertile, more nuanced, more open- minded. Today there is widespread interest from clinicians of every school in a more positive, spiritual, and visionary approach to mental health. Many who work within the constraints of our insurance and medical system struggle with the limitations of our medical clinical approach. There is a palpable relief when I teach the perspective of nobility, of training in compassion, of non- religious ways to transform suffering and nurture our sacred connection to life.

Copyright © Jack Kornfield, 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Extract from THE WISE HEART by Jack Kornfield

Available in bookshops July, 2008

ISBN: 9781846041259 | Imprint: Rider | Publisher: Random House Australia