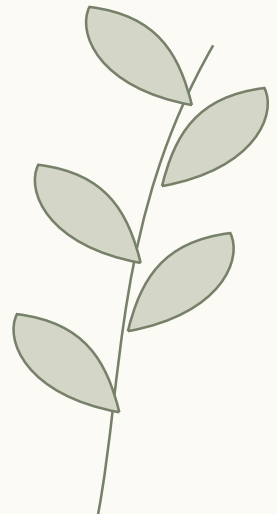


JACK KORNFIELD

What Teaching Mindfulness Has Taught Me



After more than 50 years of teaching mindfulness, what stays with me most is the people. Their sorrow, certainly. The courage it takes to sit with a broken heart. But also their laughter, their generosity, the love that appears when someone begins to feel at home in themselves.

You sit down to offer a practice, and people bring you their lives. Some are struggling. Some are discovering a happiness they didn't know was possible. Often, both are happening in the same person.

Being a teacher means being invited into all of this. You witness how difficult a human life can be, and how much goodness it can hold. Again and again, your students deepen your understanding of both.

Making room for the whole of life

Most of us come to meditation hoping it will make life easier. We would like the mind to settle down. We would like to worry less. We might also hope that the difficult people in our lives will become more reasonable.

Yes. Sometimes practice brings wonderful peace. The shoulders soften. The breath quiets. We hear a bird outside the window and realize we have been too busy to listen. There is pleasure in simply being here.

I want to make room for that pleasure in teaching. It is easy to become so serious about working with difficulty that we forget to appreciate a moment of ease. A person doesn't need a problem to deserve our attention. Their happiness is worthy of attention, too.

And, of course, people bring suffering that a peaceful meditation does not simply take away. Someone is caring for a parent with dementia. Someone is grieving a child. Someone is afraid of what comes next.

As a teacher, you learn to welcome what is actually here. You don't ask a grieving person to feel grateful. You don't ask a joyful person to look for what is wrong.

We practice opening to a whole human life. Sorrow, delight, uncertainty, affection. Each asks us to be present. and this presence opens the door to inner freedom.

The wish to help turns into the willingness to listen and love

In tough times, when someone brings you their pain, it is natural to want to help. In the teacher's seat, that wish can become urgent. Surely you ought to say something wise.

A student tells you the grief gets louder when the room grows quiet. Or they have practiced for months and feel nothing. There may be frustration in the room, including your own. You care, and you cannot make things unfold as you would like.

Teaching itself is a practice. It asks you to slow down. To feel your feet. To take a breath. Listen before deciding what this person needs.

Sometimes there is a useful instruction to offer. Sometimes someone needs more support. Sometimes they need a moment in which their experience can be received without being hurried along.

And listening includes hearing what is going well. Someone has enjoyed a morning with their children. Someone has felt peaceful walking home. We can pause and appreciate it together.

Over the years, I have come to trust this attention. It lets people be more than the difficulty that brought them to practice.

The joy is part of the teaching

There is a particular pleasure in seeing someone become less afraid of being themselves. More free.

A little humor returns. They can notice the mind making its familiar complaint and smile. The complaint may still be there, but it no longer has quite so much authority.

Meditation can be very funny. We sit down to become peaceful and spend twenty minutes arguing with someone who isn't in the room. Recognizing this together can bring such relief. We don't have to be embarrassed by being human.

With mindfulness and lovingkindness there are the quieter joys: feeling the sun on your face, appreciating a meal, listening to someone you love without already thinking about the next thing.

It moves me to see people discover that these ordinary moments are worth being awake for.

As a teacher, you practice rejoicing in another person's happiness. You don't need to have produced it. You can simply be glad for them. Their joy becomes a gift to the room, and to you.

Watching compassion become something lived

Compassion is a beautiful meditation practice and when you teach it, it sounds like a beautiful idea. But then you can gradually learn to embody it in an ordinary day.

A parent feels anger rising and pauses before speaking to a child. Someone who has been harsh with themselves begins to respond with tenderness. A person stays beside a grieving friend without trying to explain the grief away.

These are small moments with real consequences. A little less hurt is passed along. Someone feels accompanied. A relationship has room to breathe.

Compassion often grows through an honest recognition of our own difficulty. As a teacher we have learned what it is to be frightened or ashamed. That understanding can make us gentler with someone else.

But kindness also grows through being loved, through gratitude, through seeing another person's goodness. There are many ways the heart opens.

Teaching brings you close to this opening. You offer some encouragement, and you witness people finding their own ways to care. Their generosity teaches you, too.

Learning what equanimity feels like

Equanimity becomes critical in a teaching life.

You offer a class and it goes well. Another time, the room feels restless, your words don't quite land, and you leave wondering whether you were helpful. A student thanks you. Another is disappointed.

You can learn from all of this without making every response a verdict on who you are.

I think of equanimity as the steadiness that allows us to stay caring while life changes. We can enjoy appreciation without needing to hold on to it. We can hear criticism, consider what is true, and remain available.

We see this growing in students as well. A difficult feeling comes, and there is a little more room around it. A pleasant experience ends, and they don't have to spend the rest of the day trying to get it back.

There is freedom in that. Joy can be enjoyed. Sorrow can be met. We begin to trust our capacity to be present through the changes.

For the teacher, this is an ongoing practice. We care about what happens, and we keep learning how much we can and cannot control.

You keep teaching what you are still learning

Teaching has a lovely way of being a gateway to your own freedom, and also showing you where your practice is unfinished.

You offer a teaching on patience, then find yourself impatient. You guide loving-kindness during a week when you have been quite unkind to yourself. You speak about letting go while holding firmly to your side of an old argument.

There is plenty of material.

After all these years, I don't think the answer is to wait until we have become perfect. We can be perfectly imperfect. Can I acknowledge that I was caught? Can I apologize? Can I begin again with some kindness?

Students learn from our honesty. They also learn from our delight, our curiosity, and our willingness to laugh at ourselves.

Life continues the teaching after class. Family, work, the aging body, a difficult conversation, a lovely afternoon with a friend. Your life becomes your monastery, with many opportunities to practice.

Some days you see where you are still caught. Other days you notice that something has softened. You open into a spacious, loving awareness. Both deserve attention.

The responsibility of being trusted

As a teacher there is real responsibility in being invited into people's lives. Teaching can be moving and rewarding, and it can also be tiring. There are questions you cannot answer and suffering you cannot relieve.

People may bring trauma, depression, addiction, or experiences they don't understand. Sometimes they need support beyond what a meditation teacher can offer.

Care includes knowing your limits, helping someone find appropriate support, and consulting a colleague when you are unsure.

We need our own teachers. We need friends who can help us see where we are mistaken. And we need rest, ordinary pleasures, and time in which we are not responsible for guiding anyone.

"I don't know" remains an important sentence. So does "I need some help."

Experience deepens the work. It also deepens my respect for doing it with the support of others.

Seeing love take ordinary forms

Listening to people over many years changes the way you see.

You become more aware of hidden suffering. You also begin to notice the quiet love that holds so much of life together: caring for an aging parent, showing up for a friend, trying once more to understand someone.

Love is there in the patience to listen and the willingness to forgive. Sometimes it is there in setting a necessary boundary with care. Sometimes it is simply the pleasure people take in one another.

A roomful of people practicing together can hold something of this. For a little while, no one has to impress anyone. We can be quiet, feel a breath, and share the wish to live with greater awareness and kindness.

There may be tears. There may be laughter. There may be a stillness in which people feel less alone.

Being part of that continues to touch my heart.

What remains after the class

You rarely know what will stay with someone. A simple phrase may be remembered for years. A teaching you thought was especially important may be forgotten by the parking lot.

Perhaps what stays is a moment of peace, the experience of being listened to, or permission to enjoy being alive. Perhaps it is a practice that helps someone through a difficult night.

You offer what you can with care. Then you let people discover its place in their lives.

After more than 50 years, I am still moved by what becomes possible: people meeting pain with compassion, discovering steadiness, enjoying one another, allowing themselves to love.

And I am still learning alongside them.

This is what the teacher's seat offers: a close view of our struggles and our goodness, and a continuing invitation to open our heart.

May your practice steady you in difficulty. May it open you to joy. And may the love and kindness you discover find their way to others.

Jack Kornfield