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THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION with JACK KORNFIELD, Ph.D.

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Our topic today is "The Practice of Meditation," and my guest, Dr. Jack Kornfield, is a clinical psychologist and a teacher of Vipassana meditation, which is a style of Buddhist meditation. Dr. Kornfield is also the author of several books, including *Living Buddhist Masters* and also *A Still Forest Pool*. Jack, welcome.

JACK KORNFIELD, Ph.D.: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. Perhaps we could begin by having you talk a little bit about how you, a Western-trained clinical psychologist, became a student of something as exotic as Vipassana meditation and Theravada Buddhism.

KORNFIELD: Sure. I went to Asia almost twenty years ago. I graduated from Dartmouth College, where I had first studied science when I wanted to go to medical school, and then I got a little bit discouraged, because I met very good scientists and very bright people, but they weren't necessarily wise. They didn't necessarily live with their families or their associates or the world around them in a heartfelt and wise way. And so, I began to look for something in addition to science and technology, and I signed up to go in the Peace Corps to a Buddhist country, Thailand, and while there met a number of very impressive meditation masters. I ordained, and the first part of training I spent five and a half years there, mostly in Buddhist monasteries.

MISHLOVE: Courtesy of the U.S. Government.

KORNFIELD: Courtesy initially of the U.S. Government; I thank them for that. Then I came back after training as a monk for some years, and went to graduate school in psychology, trying to figure out for myself how the two fit together -- Western psychology and the kinds of training that I received in the monastery.

MISHLOVE: Did you find any links at all?

KORNFIELD: I did.

MISHLOVE: I would think it would be hard, studying in academia, to do that.

KORNFIELD: Not so difficult, because some of the issues that one faces in clinical psychology and in Buddhist practice are the same, which are the issues of human happiness. Buddhist meditation's purpose is to make people happy, to find ways that they can release old wounds from the past, live more fully in the present, let go of attachments that cause a lot of suffering in their lives; and in some way you can see clinical psychology as working in the same direction. It turned out there were quite a few parallels, although I will say I got better training in the monastery than I did doing my Ph.D. It was harder, and I think it was better as well. They're both good.

MISHLOVE: Let's look a little bit at specifically how meditation might help anybody become a happier, more compassionate person, according to, say, the ideals of Buddhism, which seem to me to be very sensible ideals. Very few people would disagree with the idea of the value of being compassionate and having a serene equanimity in one's approach to life.

KORNFIELD: Well, in Buddhism there are three aspects to practice, and all of them, again, are oriented for people to become freer and happier in their lives. The first, as in most great religions, is generosity, and one of the tenets of Buddhism is that the heart and the body and the mind can all be trained -- that is, if you practice something it will gradually grow in your life. If you practice being irritable and annoyed and angry all the time, that gets to be your habit, and after a while someone does something and you get irritated very easily. If you practice patience, or you practice kindness, or you practice generosity, and you do it over and over, even if it's self-conscious at first, after a while it grows to be your relation to the world, and people treat you differently because of it. So the three aspects of Buddhist practice are first, generosity. The second training is that of ethics, or virtue, where you try to speak and act in ways that don't harm other people. It makes it a lot easier to meditate if you've been kind and you haven't been involved in harmful behavior or stealing or gossiping or lying; when you sit down to do some inner meditation, your mind's already quiet. The third part is a kind of training of the heart and mind. Now, how does it make you happy, is your question.

MISHLOVE: I think partially you've answered that, by saying in effect that meditation all by itself isn't really enough.

KORNFIELD: That's correct. The meditation really fits in a whole framework of living a life that's conscious. The Buddha was walking down the road one day right after his enlightenment, it's told anyway, and some people saw him and were struck by his beauty and his radiance. I guess he was very happy after he was enlightened, certainly in a good mood anyway. They said, "What are you? Are you some kind of an angel, or a deva?" And he said, "No." "Well, are you a wizard, or a magician?" He said, "No." "Well, are you some kind of a god?" "No." "Are you a man?" "No," he replied. "Well, what are you, then?" And he answered, "I am awake," and in those three words, "I am awake," kind of gave the essence of meditation teaching. In Buddhist practice, that capacity to awaken is directed toward our own body and breath and physical being in the world around us; to our feelings and our heart; to our minds; and then to the world of the spirit, or the deeper levels of human existence. And so meditation, in foremost, is a process of learning how to be more conscious, or mindful, about all that within us.

MISHLOVE: Many people have an image of meditation, and I think I've seen it myself in some instances, in which a person uses it to create a wall -- in effect to withdraw, to avoid dealing with reality.

KORNFIELD: That's a very important question, because it's been confused that way, and because certain kinds of meditation practices -- Buddhist or Jewish mystical or Hindu or Christian -- many of them are done in remote monasteries and you remove yourself from the world. There are two major flavors to meditation, two major categories of it. One is the kind where you try and make yourself quiet -- by going in a cave, or closing your eyes and ears and saying something over and over and over again to shut the world out. It makes you very peaceful, but the problem is that when you're done, you leave the cave or you stop meditating and you go back to drive on the freeway or to the supermarket, and there you are again, and you get upset again easily.

MISHLOVE: I know of people who are living, say, in the city, and they may meditate and enjoy their meditative practice, even talk about ecstatic states that they get into, but they seem oblivious to obvious things around them, like keeping themselves neat and clean.

KORNFIELD: Exactly right. The second whole class of meditation, in which Vipassana and Zen and a number of other practices --

MISHLOVE: What does Vipassana mean?

KORNFIELD: It means to see clearly in Sanskrit. It's a word that's a meditation for learning to see ourselves and our lives clearly. All these other kinds of meditation fall in a group in which one seeks to

find stillness in the midst of activity, so that you look for stillness not by shutting the world out, but by finding a centeredness or an ease or a peacefulness, even though you're hearing and seeing and smelling and tasting. That's a kind of practice that you can do when driving or speaking with someone.

MISHLOVE: In other words, you might be meditating right now.

KORNFIELD: I might be meditating right now, if I was any good at it, that's right. Now there's another part of your question, which is interesting, because many people have used meditation as a kind of escape, and anything can be used as an escape. Television can be used as an escape; eating can be used as an escape. Meditation has also been used or misused in that way -- you meditate a lot and try and get rid of your troubles by escaping. There's a teaching in Buddhism called "the Near Enemies" which is relevant to this. It says that the near enemy to love is attachment; the near enemy to compassion is pity; and the near enemy to equanimity is indifference. Let me take just one of those to illustrate it -- equanimity, because it's so important. Many people think that if you become meditative you become passive like a jellyfish, and you don't care -- "Who cares? It doesn't matter" -- sort of from the hippie days. It's, "Well, if it happens it's OK; if it doesn't I can change jobs, try a new wife, a new relationship."

MISHLOVE: Do your thing.

KORNFIELD: "It's all impermanent, it's all a passing show." That's indifference. It's a non-caring, it's a withdrawal from the world. True equanimity, which is taught in meditation, is a kind of balance in which you let the world come in, you engage in the world, and find an ability to be with the world without fear. Meditation helps one, through centering with the breath, getting quiet in the body, and then opening to what's inside, to learn a kind of fearlessness or openness.

MISHLOVE: In other words, if we act indifferent, or if we feel indifferent or withdrawn, or have a cold feeling towards the world around us, it may be fear that's at the root of that.

KORNFIELD: Very often fear, and in fact it's the opposite of meditation. One of the key things in meditation that people learn -- and this is why it's helpful in their lives -- is they learn how to sit and be with all the kinds of things within them, things that might otherwise be difficult. Some people are afraid of boredom, some are compulsively eating because they're lonely or they're hungry for love but it comes out through food. Some people are afraid just of being quiet, of being still. All kinds of things. Or past things that arise in their mind, that they keep themselves busy not to think about -- guilt and so forth.

MISHLOVE: Ultimately I suppose in meditation a person is confronting themselves.

KORNFIELD: That's correct, that's exactly right. And in doing that you can learn to relate with kindness, with love, with more awareness, than if you don't look inside. It's actually kind of practical. Most of the people I know who have developed somewhat in meditation can play tennis with more concentration, can be with another person more fully, because they've trained themselves to be more present and a bit more open.

MISHLOVE: But a number of people in the community are really afraid of themselves. They're afraid that if they meditate they're going to learn the horrible truth about themselves that they're afraid of, or that they're a terrible person underneath. I encounter people like this. They just are not ready to confront themselves, because, I suppose, of low self-esteem. Maybe they've covered it over. They may seem superficially quite successful, but they don't want to look at themselves.

KORNFIELD: In twelve or thirteen years of teaching retreats in this country now -- I've taught some thousands of people -- I've found that half of the work people do in meditation in the West is work of self-acceptance -- seeing the places where their hearts are closed, where they've held in their bodies,

where they're afraid, where they say, "I don't like this, and I don't like that," that need acceptance. By acceptance it doesn't mean to follow every whim or indulgence, but it means not to be afraid and not to close oneself off. There's a whole process in meditation, in a deep way of learning to care for oneself -- one's body, one's feelings, one's heart, one's mind. And then, when you do that, you have the resources, the happiness inside, to begin to care for others. There's another piece which is critical, and that is not being so afraid of what's painful. Our lives are a duality. There's light and dark, and up and down, and sweet and sour, and pleasure and pain. Yet our culture is really afraid of it. We put freeways around ghettos and old people in old age homes, and dress our corpses up like they're going to some kind of a party or banquet -- unlike India, where someone who's died is honored and some flowers are put on there, but we don't pretend they're still alive. So our culture is almost phobic about pain. We have air conditioners and heat and everything to keep us comfortable. Mother Teresa was asked in an interview one time about her life, and they said, "Well, it's so good what you do, but somehow it must be easier for you. After all, you don't have a car and you don't have insurance policies and all the bills to pay like we mortal people do. You don't have a family, you don't have children or a husband, and so forth, and so it's easier." She said, "No, no." And she held up the ring which symbolizes the wedding of the nuns in her order to Christ. She said, "I'm married too, and he can be very difficult sometimes." In some ways, if it's hard for Mother Teresa you can bet that in some ways spiritual practice will be hard for anyone. So your question is right, but what the possibility is through meditation, is learning in a gentle way how to open to things that are closed, how to touch places that have been hurt or fearful or wounded in us, with a gentle awareness, and to release them to heal ourselves, and find a way to live in the present more fully.

MISHLOVE: But step back just a second, because we haven't quite defined meditation. We've been talking about it, and I know that within Buddhism, probably within your particular branch of Buddhism, there must be a hundred or more different kinds of meditation. So given that there are so many different techniques and different styles, what can we really say? If somebody who's watching us now doesn't know what meditation is at all, how would we describe it?

KORNFIELD: There are a couple of major parts to all meditation. The first is just a quieting. The mind tends to be very busy and filled with thoughts of past and future and anxieties and plans and delights and memories, so much that we walk down the beach and don't smell the ocean or feel the sand, because we're thinking about something else all the time.

MISHLOVE: This is what's sometimes called the monkey mind.

KORNFIELD: That's right. So the first piece of all meditation is just to learn to quiet ourselves and become a little more aware in the present. There's a sign in a casino in Las Vegas that a friend of mine took and now has in his therapy room, that says, "You must be present to win." It's true in Las Vegas, and it's true in therapy, and it's true in tennis, and it's the starting point of meditation. So the first thing is the calming, and you can use the breath, feeling it go in and out, or becoming aware of the breathing through the heart, or saying some prayer over and over again, or some word, some mantra, over and over, as a way just to let the heart and the mind and the body come to rest in the present. Then the second thing in meditation, especially in the various Buddhist meditations that I teach, is once you become quiet, a process of awareness or discovery. You become a little still, and then you begin to observe. Now what's going on in the body? Where is it tight, or where is it held, and is it possible to release that? What's going on in the heart? What are the barriers or the fears there? What forgiveness may be necessary? What things in the heart haven't been listened to? And then further into the mind -- how is the mind working? What am I getting caught up in too much? Where is there too much fear or attachment that I could let go of and live more peacefully? So it's a process of quieting first, and then of a discovery of how the body and the heart and the mind work, and the laws which let us relate a little more wisely and kindly to them.

MISHLOVE: In this kind of practice, how as a psychologist would you distinguish it from, say, self-hypnosis or autogenic training or some of the more Western practices?

KORNFIELD: Somebody asked one of my teachers, wasn't meditation kind of like self-hypnosis, and he replied, actually it's de-hypnosis. In a way we live in a very conditioned reality, mostly on automatic pilot. We eat three times a day, cook, make our meals, shop for the food, do that primarily unconsciously. We talk for hours, usually not so mindful or aware of what we do. So the process of meditation is to begin to take first the simple activity while sitting, of the breath, or what sensations arise in the body, or moods, or feelings of the heart, and try to bring them into a fuller, more conscious awareness.

MISHLOVE: That can be painful.

KORNFIELD: Sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's pleasant. Meditation isn't to make it all pleasant, but to find a place in our being and in our heart which can open to that with gentleness and kindness, so that it's free, so that it's released.

MISHLOVE: What I suppose we're getting at to some extent though is the unconscious.

KORNFIELD: That's right.

MISHLOVE: Things that we have chosen for one reason or another not to be conscious about. And often we choose not to be conscious about tensions that we have in our bodies and in our minds, so one would expect naturally, I suppose, that one of the first things in meditation is that you would become aware of tensions.

KORNFIELD: That's right, and it's actually a beautiful process for people who do it even for a short while. If you sit and you're quiet and you pay attention to your body -- even those who are listening could do this -- they can feel the places where they chronically hold their tension. For some it's the jaw or the neck or the belly. It doesn't matter. As you get quiet, that starts to reveal itself, those patterns of holding. Initially our response is, "Well, let's distract ourselves. Let's have an Oreo cookie, or let's turn on TV," or something. But if you stay with it and bring a gentle awareness to it, even though it hurts a bit at first -- because it starts to come alive, all the pain that's stashed in there starts to open -- if you bring a gentle awareness to it, gradually it will soften and open, and the jaw relaxes, and the neck and shoulders drop, and you find if you do it daily, that you can really open your body.

MISHLOVE: You seem to be saying, then, that meditative awareness has a healing quality to it.

KORNFIELD: Exactly right. In fact there's a healing on all the dimensions of our being -- first in the physical dimension, the body; secondly in the heart, because there are a lot of feelings -- lack of forgiveness, or things that have knotted in us, or barriers -- that through awareness we can release and open. And similarly in the mind there are ideals and concepts which we hold that are old, that don't serve us anymore, and those can be released. Most importantly, in the deepest levels meditation can touch places that go beyond our limited sense of our self, to connect with the mystery of the earth and life and the kind of universal laws of birth and death and impermanence that give us a sense of grace and ease in living.

MISHLOVE: I suppose it might be fair to interject at this point that in Buddhist meditation and most meditative traditions, it is associated to some degree with psychic abilities.

KORNFIELD: They can be, if one believes in psychic abilities and has either some experience or understanding of that. You will find that in many meditative traditions there are particular practices to tune or refine those. In fact, everybody has intuitive or psychic abilities, and there are all kinds of circumstances where they come into play. Sometimes in great difficulties in life one all of a sudden gets a hunch or an intuition that's based on a connection other than just our normal thinking, and by

becoming quiet and training concentration in meditation we get more access to those levels of intuition.

MISHLOVE: Now I would just have to imagine, Jack, that as a teacher of meditation you have your own intuition very finely developed. For example, I know you've written in an article I read that the Buddha himself had many disciples, and each one got different teachings from him, depending on their particular needs. The Buddha from his own intuition and inner resources was able to know just how to prescribe for each person. I suppose it must be the same even today, for example in the teaching that you do.

KORNFIELD: It's true, and it's really true for any good teacher. If you go into a second-grade elementary school and Miss Jones is a really gifted teacher, she will intuit through her feelings, through her observation, through her sense of the children, which ones need to be pushed, which ones need to just be held and loved a little bit, which ones need more academic encouragement, who needs to go out and play on the playground. And so what meditation can awaken in us is not something strange, and what I found in the monasteries was not different than that which is here in the West, but actually are simply tools or techniques for enhancing or opening our natural human capacities.

MISHLOVE: Let's talk a little bit more about the tools of meditation. You mentioned that you might be in meditation right now. I suppose what you're saying is that ideally one is always in this state of awareness.

KORNFIELD: Yes.

MISHLOVE: I've seen some Buddhist teachers who practice what they call a walking meditation, walking in circles. Other times you see people sitting in lotus position, or sitting on little pillows. Is there any posture or position that's better than another?

KORNFIELD: What's most helpful is that you sit up relatively straight. You can sit in a chair or cross-legged or on a bench. You can keep your eyes either open or closed; if they're open, just downcast in front of you so that you're not looking around too much. But with the posture, it's that you sit relatively straight, so that your breath can move easily. If you lean back or slump, there's a tendency to go to sleep. Sleep is wonderful; it's just a different state than meditation. If you want to sleep, better to lie down; you get a better sleep than sitting.

MISHLOVE: So would you not recommend meditating lying down?

KORNFIELD: It can be done, but it's harder. There's such a tendency to go off in sleep. So then when you've found a comfortable posture -- sitting cross-legged, or sitting up in a chair -- then you could begin very easily by closing your eyes at first to minimize distractions, and just feeling the breath as it moves in and out of the body, as a way to center or quiet or calm yourself. You could note in and out as you do that, or count your breaths, but most important is to actually feel the breath -- the coolness in the nose, the movement of the belly -- and in doing so it's bringing the mind and body together, so the mind isn't off at Disneyland or Las Vegas or New York or tomorrow's appointment, but you really train yourself to be here a little more. And when you train yourself in that way, over many days of doing it, then when you decide to feel and pay attention in your body, you can do it. Or if you want to talk to someone, you do that more than thinking about the dinner that's planned afterward, or some event that happened in the morning before.

MISHLOVE: So in your style, you suggest that people just pay attention to whatever's happening to them. It's not as if they have to focus on beads or a mantra or something particular, or is it?

KORNFIELD: It's actually a combination. That's correct, what you said, but in this style we start first by using the breath just as a way to quiet. So if you had twenty minutes to meditate, maybe you'd do ten minutes of just following your breath till you were here more in the present and felt your body. And

then as you followed the breath, if sensations or sounds or strong feelings or anything strong arises, then you let that be received in your awareness and make that part of the meditation, being conscious of it or mindful of it without reacting or without judging it, and letting things come and be released in that way.

MISHLOVE: Is there a point at which you sort of become conscious of yourself becoming conscious of yourself -- kind of, you might call it, a cybernetic feedback loop, or awareness of awareness?

KORNFIELD: It seems like that, but what's actually happening is that there's a succession of thoughts. There's not a lot of layers like mirrors, but in the moment you may be breathing, and then another moment later you think, "Now I'm aware of my breath." And another moment later you say, "I was just thinking about being aware of my breath." And then another thought comes that says, "I was thinking about thinking about it." So if you look closely, you see that really there's just awareness and our experience, and that awareness includes thought, and the thought is what complicates things. It makes it seem like there are lots of layers, but actually there's just this moment. If you want to do a quick exercise --

MISHLOVE: We have one minute.

KORNFIELD: Do we have one minute only? You could close your eyes for thirty seconds, and try to count your thoughts, and see what kind of thoughts you see.

MISHLOVE: How many thoughts you might see.

KORNFIELD: In thirty seconds. And you observe they're picture thoughts or word thoughts, sad thoughts, happy thoughts, tricky ones that say, "Now I'm observing my thought." See if you can count, in thirty seconds or a minute, ten or twenty thoughts, and if you do you begin to get a sense that there's this whole inner world which can be observed and related to without being lost in. You can use meditation to discover, in your body and your heart and your mind, the whole workings of your inner life, and maybe relate to it with greater kindness and greater awareness.

MISHLOVE: Jack Kornfield, it's been a pleasure having you with me. You've been able to really articulate, I think in a way easily understandable to Westerners, what meditation is about. Thank you very much for being with me.

KORNFIELD: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

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