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After the Ecstasy, the Laundry

Jack Kornfield

ABOUT THE BOOK

Most accounts of spiritual enlightenment end at the moment of illumination. But what happens after that? What is life like after the ecstasy? How do we live our understanding with a full heart? In this unique mix of practical and spiritual wisdom, Jack Kornfield, author of the bestselling *A Path With Heart* and one of the most respected Buddhist meditation teachers in the West, sets out to answer these crucial questions. Drawing on discussions with abbots, lamas and Western meditation masters, Kornfield describes with refreshing honesty their different experiences of the moment of enlightenment and what lessons they – and we – can learn from these as each of us seeks to fulfil the true path of compassion on earth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JACK KORNFIELD was trained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand, Burma, and India, and has taught meditation around the world since 1974. He is one of the key teachers to introduce Theravada Buddhist practice to the West. For many years his work has been focused on integrating and bringing alive the great Eastern spiritual teachings in a way that is accessible to Western students and Western society. He also holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. He is a husband and father, and a founding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Center. His books include *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom; A Still Forest Pool*; *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*; *Buddha's Little Instruction Book*; *A Path with Heart*; and *Teachings of the Buddha*.

Praise for
JACK KORNFIELD

‘It’s encouraging to find Westerners who’ve sufficiently assimilated the traditions of the East to be able to share them with others as Jack is doing. May such efforts further the peace of all beings.’

– *H. H. the Dalai Lama*

‘It’s no easy thing to follow a spiritual path across the threshold of the 21st century; to understand the teachings fully, to practise them wisely and to integrate them in action in our life. Eight hundred years ago, the Tibetan master Gampopa prayed: “Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the Dharma; grant your blessings so that Dharma may progress along the path; grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion; grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.” These words are just as true today, when anyone embracing the spiritual life needs to learn how to recognize the misunderstandings, difficulties and confusions that can arise, and how to transform them into inspiration and a source of strength. Jack Kornfield is a remarkable and thoughtful teacher. He knows that by making our spiritual journey with love and compassion, with joyfulness and equanimity, with patience and forgiveness, we will discover not only the heart of Buddha but also the heart of what it means to be a truly human being.’

– *Sogyal Rinpoche*

‘Once again Jack Kornfield demonstrates his breath of knowledge and experience of the mindscape and heart rhythm of the spiritual, and particularly the meditative, journey. With an open-hearted expertise rare in a Westerner, Jack offers a benevolent travelogue along the Way.’

– *Stephen Levine*

‘It’s the mixture that makes Jack’s book work so wonderfully well. Humor, ordinary stories, exact advice for critical moments, huge learning of his discipline, and a happy heart – what a pleasant path into the depths.’

– *James Hillman*

‘Our psychological and spiritual processes are too often treated as discrete. *A Path with Heart* happily shows how Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again!’

– *Ram Dass*

‘Jack Kornfield offers a friendly, warm, and eminently useful guide to the meditator’s path, brimming with clarity. *A Path with Heart* is an ideal companion for anyone exploring the life of the spirit.’

– *Daniel Goleman*

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AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY

How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path

Jack Kornfield

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Dedicated to
Ven. Ajahn Chah, to his Dharma brother
Ven. Ajahn Buddhadasa, and to
the lineage of
the Elders of the forest.

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Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
2000

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AN OPENING BOW

When I found myself becoming a Buddhist monk in a forest monastery of Thailand over thirty years ago, I had to learn how to bow. It was awkward at first. Each time we entered the meditation hall we would drop to our knees and three times respectfully place our head between our palms on the stone floor. It was a practice of reverence and mindfulness, a way of honoring with a bodily gesture our commitment to the monk's path of simplicity, compassion, and awareness. We would bow in the same way each time we took our seat for training with the master.

After I had been in the monastery for a week or two, one of the senior monks pulled me aside for further instruction. "In this monastery you must not only bow when entering the meditation hall and receiving teachings from the master, but also when you meet your elders." As the only Westerner, and wanting to act correctly, I asked who my elders were. "It is traditional that all who are older in ordination time, who've been monks longer than you, are your elders," I was told. It took only a moment to realize that meant everybody.

So I began to bow to them. Sometimes it was just fine—there were quite a few wise and worthy elders in the community. But sometimes it felt ridiculous. I would encounter some twenty-one-year-old monk, full of hubris, who was there only to please his parents or to eat better food than he could at home, and I had to bow because he had been ordained the week before me. Or I had to bow to a sloppy old rice farmer who had come to the monastery the season before on the farmers' retirement plan, who chewed

betel nut constantly and had never meditated a day in his life. It was hard to pay reverence to these fellow forest dwellers as if they were great masters.

Yet there I was bowing, and because I was in conflict, I sought a way to make it work. Finally, as I prepared yet again for a day of bowing to my “elders,” I began to look for some worthy aspect of each person I bowed to. I bowed to the wrinkles around the retired farmer’s eyes, for all the difficulties he had seen and suffered through and triumphed over. I bowed to the vitality and playfulness in the young monks, the incredible possibilities each of their lives held yet ahead of them.

I began to enjoy bowing. I bowed to my elders, I bowed before I entered the dining hall and as I left. I bowed as I entered my forest hut, and I bowed at the well before taking a bath. After some time bowing became my way—it was just what I did. If it moved, I bowed to it.

It is the spirit of bowing that informs this book. The true task of spiritual life is not found in faraway places or unusual states of consciousness: It is here in the present. It asks of us a welcoming spirit to greet all that life presents to us with a wise, respectful, and kindly heart. We can bow to both beauty and suffering, to our entanglements and confusion, to our fears and to the injustices of the world. Honoring the truth in this way is the path to freedom. To bow to what *is* rather than to some ideal is not necessarily easy, but however difficult, it is one of the most useful and honorable practices.

To bow to the fact of our life’s sorrows and betrayals is to accept them; and from this deep gesture we discover that all life is workable. As we learn to bow, we discover that the heart holds more freedom and compassion than we could imagine.

The Persian poet Rumi speaks of it this way:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.

Still treat each guest honorably,
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

INTRODUCTION:
Some Honest Questions

When the bird and the book disagree, always believe the bird.
JAMES AUDUBON

Enlightenment does exist. It is possible to awaken. Unbounded freedom and joy, oneness with the Divine, awakening into a state of timeless grace—these experiences are more common than you know, and not far away. There is one further truth, however: They don't last. Our realizations and awakenings show us the reality of the world, and they bring transformation, but they pass.

Of course, you may have read traditional accounts of fully enlightened sages in Asia or of wholly unblemished saints and mystics in the West. But these ideal narratives can be misleading. In fact, in the awakening of the heart there is no such thing as enlightened retirement. That is not how it happens to us.

We all know that after the honeymoon comes the marriage, after the election comes the hard task of governance. In spiritual life it is the same: After the ecstasy comes the laundry.

Most spiritual accounts end with illumination or enlightenment. But what if we ask what happens after that? What happens when the Zen master returns home to spouse and children? What happens when the Christian mystic goes shopping? What is life like after the ecstasy? How do we live our understanding with a full heart?

To explore these questions I have spoken with a number of people who have dedicated twenty-five, thirty-five, forty years to a spiritual path, especially those who have become the Western meditation masters and abbots, the Western teachers and lamas of our generation. They told me of their initial journeys and awakenings, and then described the lessons of the years that followed, as they have sought to fulfill the true path of compassion on this earth.

Here is one account of a Western Zen master's initial satori (enlightenment experience) and its aftermath. Such accounts are rarely made public because of the danger that they will give the wrong impression, that those who experience such an awakening are somehow special. Although the experience is special, it does not happen to a special person. It happens to any of us when the conditions of letting go and opening the heart are present, when we can sense the world in a radically new way.

For this teacher, awakening came at age fifty-eight, after many years of practice with several meditation masters, while at the same time he was developing a career and raising a family.

The weeklong meditation of a Zen sesshin was always very intense for me. I would feel a deep emotional release, and strong memories would come up as if I were in a birth process—strong pains and physical catharsis. These would carry over for weeks when I went back home.

This sesshin began the same way. During the first days I struggled with powerful emotions and the release of energies coursing through my body, and each time I saw the master he would sit there like a rock, his presence steadying me like a rudder in dark turbulent seas. I felt as if I was dying or breaking apart. He urged me to sink into my koan, to let myself go

completely into it. I couldn’t tell where my life began or left off.

Then a surprising sweetness began to seep in. I saw three young birch trees out the window, and they were like my family. I could feel myself go and stroke their smooth bark, and I became the tree touching myself. My meditation filled with light.

I had felt bliss before—big waves of it on some retreats after my body pains opened up—but this was different. All struggle stopped, and my mind became luminous, radiant, vast as the sky, and filled with a most delicious scent of freedom, of awakening. I felt like the Buddha sitting effortlessly hour after hour, held and protected by the whole universe. I lived in a world of unending peace and unspeakable joy.

The great truths of life were so clear—the way grasping is the cause of suffering; that by following the small sense of self, this false ego, we run around like the petty landlord, squabbling over nothing. I wept at all our unnecessary sorrows. Then for hours I could not stop smiling and laughing. I saw how perfect it all is, how every single moment is enlightenment if only we open to it.

For days I rested in this timeless utter peace, my body floating, my mind empty. I would wake up and waves of love and joyful energy would stream through my consciousness. Then, insights and revelations came, one after another. I saw how the stream of life unfolds in patterns that we create as the flow of our karma. I saw the whole idea of spiritual renunciation as kind of a joke, trying to make oneself let go of ordinary life and pleasures. In fact, Nirvana is so open and joyful, is so much more than any of the small pleasures we grasp after. You don’t renounce the world, you gain the world.

The description of a great awakening like this usually appears at the end of a spiritual story. Enlightenment comes, the person enters the stream of wise beings, and everything follows naturally after that. In essence we are left with the impression that the awakened person lives happily ever after. But what happens if we stay with this story and ask to hear further chapters?

> *Some months after all this ecstasy came a depression, along with some significant betrayals in my work. I had continuing trouble with my children and family too. Oh, my teaching was fine. I could give inspired lectures, but if you talk to my wife, she'll tell you that as the time passed I became grouchy and as impatient as ever. I knew that this great spiritual vision was the truth, and it was there underneath, but I also recognized how many things didn't change at all. To be honest, my mind and personality were pretty much the same, and my neuroses too. Perhaps it's worse, because now I see them more clearly. Here were these cosmic revelations and I still needed therapy just to sort through the day-to-day mistakes and lessons of living a human life*.

What are we to make of an account of awakening like this one and the story that follows? It offers us a mirror for self-understanding. Sacred traditions have always been carried in great measure by storytelling: We tell and retell the story of Noah, the Bal Shem Tov, Mohammed, St. Theresa, Milarepa, Krishna and Arjuna, the Buddha's search, the stories of Jesus. In modern times we learn from the lives of Thomas Merton, Suzuki Roshi, Anne Frank, and Martin Luther King Jr. Through other spiritual lives we can see our own possibilities and better understand how to live wisely.

People-watching is also in my lineage. My teacher Ajahn Chah knew that through our character is found both our suffering and our liberation. So he would peer at those who

came to see him like a watchmaker taking off the case of a watch to see how it ticks.

By good fortune, as a spiritual “professional,” circumstances have given me close contact with many figures in modern spiritual life. I have lived and taught with holy nuns and wise abbots of Christian monasteries, with Jewish mystics, with Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist masters, and with leading figures of the Jungian and Transpersonal communities. What one can observe and hear in such company reveals much about the way the modern spiritual journey unfolds, and the difficulties even the most dedicated people encounter. Here is an example of what one might learn in such company.

Since the early 1990s, I have been involved in convening a succession of gatherings for Buddhist teachers from all the great schools. One series was hosted by the Dalai Lama at his Dharamsala palace. Here Western and Asian teachers gathered to discuss the ways Buddhist practice might be of help in the modern world, and also to address the difficulties we encountered. It was a roomful of good-hearted, compassionate Zen masters, lamas, monks, and meditation masters whose wisdom, work, and communities had brought benefit to thousands. We talked about many successes, and our joy in being part of them. But when the time came to talk honestly about our problems, it grew clear that spiritual life was not entirely harmonious; it reflected our collective struggles and individual neuroses as well. Even among such an august and dedicated company, there were major areas of prejudice and blindness.

Sylvia Wetzel, a Buddhist teacher from Germany, talked about how hard it was for women and feminine wisdom to be fully included in the Buddhist community. She pointed to the many golden Buddhas and exquisite Tibetan paintings surrounding our room, noting they were all depicting males. Then she instructed the Dalai Lama and the other lamas and masters to close their eyes and meditate with her, to

imagine that they were entering the room and that it had been transformed so that they bowed to the fourteenth female incarnation of the Dalai Lama. With her were many advisors who had always been female, and surrounding them were images of Buddhas and saints, all naturally in women's bodies. Of course, it is never taught that there is anything lesser about being a man. Despite that, these men were asked to sit in the back, be silent, and after the meeting to help with the cooking. At the end of her meditation, the eyes of every man in the room reopened, slightly astonished.

Then Ani Tenzin Palmo, a Tibetan nun of English descent who had trained for twenty years, twelve of them in caves on the Tibetan border, spoke in a gentle voice describing the spiritual longing and incredible hardships of devoted women, who were allowed to live only at the periphery of the monasteries, often without teaching, food, or support. When she finished, the Dalai Lama put his head in his hands and wept. He pledged his best support to revising the place of women in his community to one of more equality. And yet in the years since, many senior teachers in every Buddhist country have continued to resist and struggle against these changes, sometimes in the name of tradition, at other times because of psychological and cultural conditioning. At the meeting with the Dalai Lama, one senior Zen abbot admitted that his painful relationship with his mother made it nearly impossible for him to guide the group of women who had become priests in his temple. Others admitted their own struggles in this area.

Our conversation turned to other forms of blindness: sectarianism and destructive power struggles between certain Buddhist masters and communities; the isolation and loneliness of the role of the teacher; the teachers who may in turn have exploited their students through misuse of power, money, and sexuality. In informal discussions we spoke also of more personal problems: Teachers described

painful divorces, periods of fear and depression, conflicts with family or other community members. Meditation teachers told of stress and illness, of teenage children threatening suicide or belligerent teens wanting to stay out all night, who confront their parents with “You’re a Zen master, and look how attached you are.” We all have the problems that come with bodies, personalities, family, and community. We saw our common humanity.

Fortunately we also shared the astonishing gifts that spiritual practices had given us, the joy and freedom we had learned to carry with us in the difficult and changing circumstances of the world.

What was remarkable and new was the honesty with which we spoke. Our intention was inspired by the humility and compassion of the Dalai Lama himself, always eager to learn, even from his mistakes. We began to see that we could learn from one another, find ways to avoid re-creating painful mistakes, to allow our ideals to embrace our humanness. It was as if the flowering of individual wisdom and learning came more fully alive as a collective, as a whole.

The difficulties of finding a wise expression of spiritual life in modern circumstances are not limited to Eastern traditions. One mother superior, the beloved abbess of a century-old Catholic nunnery in Maine, grew up in the silence of her cloister from age seventeen until the 1960s. Then Pope John XXIII, in the spirit of reform, changed the mass from Latin to English, and opened the strict silence of the monastic orders. This was incredibly hard for those who had been sheltered in holy silence for decades, their days filled with prayer and inner reflection. They simply didn’t know how to talk, and when they did, what emerged was sometimes surprisingly conflicted. Along with their love came out many hidden judgments, built-up resentments, pettiness, and fears that had been kept hidden within the container of prayer and silence. The sisters were forced to

grapple with their spiritual life out loud, without any prior training in wise speech. Many fled the convent. It took some years for the community to find the same grace in human words they had felt in silence. Yet spiritual life needs both. As much as our breath comes in and out, it must integrate inner knowing and outer expression. It is not enough to touch awakening. We must find ways to live its vision fully.

Perfect enlightenment appears in many texts, but amid all the Western masters and teachers I know, such utter perfection is not apparent. Times of great wisdom, deep compassion, and a real knowing of freedom alternate with periods of fear, confusion, neurosis, and struggle. Most teachers will readily admit this truth. Unfortunately, a few Westerners have claimed to achieve a perfection and freedom with no shadow. Among their communities, things are worse: By their self-inflation they have often created the most power-centered and destructive communities among us.

The wisest express a greater humility. Abbots like Father Thomas Keating of Snowmass Monastery and Norman Fischer of the San Francisco Zen Center, for example, regularly say, “I’m learning” and “I don’t know.” In the spirit of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and the Dalai Lama, they understand that spiritual perfection is not born of oneself, but of patience and love that grow through the wisdom of the larger community; that spiritual fulfillment and freedom include a compassion for all that arises in this human form.

One might ask at this point: What about the old masters in Asia? Might it not be that Western Zen masters and lamas are simply too young and undeveloped to represent real enlightenment? Many Western teachers would agree that this is true of themselves. But while there might be someone far away who appears to fit the image of perfect enlightenment, that appearance may result from a confusion between the archetypal and the human levels. In

Tibet there is a saying that your guru should live at least three valleys away. These valleys are separated by huge mountains, so to see your teacher means many days of hard travel. The point is that only at this distance can you be inspired by the perfection of the guru.

When I complained to my abbot Ajahn Chah, considered by millions to be a great saint, that he didn't always act as if he were completely enlightened, he laughed and told me that was good, "because otherwise you would still be imagining that you could find the Buddha outside of yourself. And he is not here."

Indeed, many of the most appealing and highly regarded Asian masters have spoken about still being students themselves, always learning from mistakes. Some, like Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, did not even claim enlightenment. Instead, Suzuki Roshi said, "Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity." This remarkable statement tells us that enlightenment cannot be held by anyone. It simply exists in moments of freedom.

Pir Vilayat Khan, the seventy-five-year-old head of the Sufi Order in the West, confides his own belief:

> *Of so many great teachers I've met in India and Asia, if you were to bring them to America, get them a house, two cars, a spouse, three kids, a job, insurance, and taxes . . . they would all have a hard time*.

Whatever our initial vision of spiritual life, to be authentic, it must be fulfilled here and now, in the place where we live. What does a Westerner's journey look like in the midst of a complex society? How have those who have devoted twenty-five, thirty, forty years to spiritual practice learned to live? These are the questions I began to ask of those who have become Western Zen masters, lamas, rabbis, abbots, nuns, yogis, teachers, and their most senior students.

To understand spiritual life I started at the beginning. I asked what draws us to the life of the spirit and what difficulties we have to pass through on our way. I asked what gifts and awakenings have come, and what we can know about enlightenment. Then I asked what happens after the ecstasy, as we mature in the cycles of spiritual life. Is there a wisdom which includes both the ecstasy and the laundry?

PART ONE

Preparation for Ecstasy

1

BABA YAGA AND OUR SACRED LONGING

The moment I heard my first story
I started looking for you. . . .

—RUMI

Midway along our road of life I woke to find myself standing alone in a dark wood.

DANTE ALIGHIERI

What is it that draws a person to spiritual life? From as far back as we can remember, we can each sense a mystery in being alive. When we are present with an infant in the first moments after birth, or when the death of a loved one brushes close to us, the mystery becomes tangible. It is there when we witness a radiant sunset or find a moment's silent stillness in the flowing seasons of our days. Connecting to the sacred is perhaps our deepest need and longing.

Awakening calls to us in a thousand ways. As the poet Rumi sings, "Grapes want to turn to wine." There is a pull to wholeness, to being fully alive, even when we have forgotten. The Hindus tell us that the child in the womb sings, "Do not let me forget who I am," but that the song after birth becomes, "Oh, I have forgotten already."

Still, as surely as there is a voyage away, there is a journey home.

Throughout the world we find stories of this journey, images of the longing to awaken, the steps along the path

that we all follow, the voices that call, the intensity of the initiation we may meet, the courage we need. At the heart of each is the original sincerity of the seeker, who must honestly admit how small is our knowledge of the universe, how great the unknown.

The honesty the spiritual quest requires of us is addressed in the Russian initiation tales about Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga is an old woman with a wild, haglike visage who stirs her pot and knows all things. She lives deep in the forest. When we seek her out we are frightened, for she requires us to go into the dark, to ask dangerous questions, to step outside the world of logic and comfort.

When the first young seeker comes quaking up to the door of her hut, Baba Yaga demands, “Are you on your own errand or are you sent by another?” The young man, encouraged in his quest by his family, answers, “I am sent by my father.” Baba Yaga promptly throws him into the pot and cooks him. The next to attempt this quest, a young woman, sees the smoldering fire and hears the cackle of Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga again demands, “Are you on your own errand or are you sent by another?” This young woman has been pulled to the woods alone to seek what she can find there. “I am on my own errand,” she replies. Baba Yaga throws her in the pot and cooks her too.

Later a third visitor, again a young woman, deeply confused by the world, comes to Baba Yaga’s house far into the forest. She sees the smoke and knows it is dangerous. Baba Yaga confronts her, “Are you on your own errand, or are you sent by another?” This young woman answers truthfully. “In large part I’m on my own errand, but in large part I also come because of others. And in large part I have come because you are here, and because of the forest, and something I have forgotten, and in large part I know not why I come.” Baba Yaga regards her for a moment and says, “You’ll do,” and shows her into the hut.