

Book Review
The Wise Heart

A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology

By Jack Kornfield

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“We can be a lamp, a medicine, a liberating presence for all,” Buddhist elder and psychologist Jack Kornfield tells us in his new book *The Wise Heart*. His words have a special resonance for me as an MFT intern.

With beautiful, clear prose, humor, and dozens of teaching stories, this admired teacher shows us that timeless spiritual principles can be used to bring relief to men, women, and children who are living lives of considerable suffering and distress. In place of suffering, he shows us a way of compassion, love, joy, and peace; a graceful way to live a life with courage, generosity, and unfolding human growth. He describes a psychology that includes “. . . the spiritual dimension and the highest human potential in its vision of healing.”

In *The Wise Heart*, the author features “the practices of mindfulness, generosity, loving-kindness, and integrity, which are at the heart of Buddhist teachings.” He describes a “. . . positive, spiritual, and visionary approach to mental health. . . a revolutionary way to understand and release suffering.”

In the introduction, he says “I want us to discover the power of the heart to hold all things -- sorrow, loneliness, shame, desire, regret, frustration, happiness, and peace -- and to find a deep trust that wherever we are and whatever we face, we can be free in their midst.”

The book is organized around 26 principles of Buddhist psychology, though we need not put undue emphasis on a religious aspect. “Buddhist teachings,” the book says, “are not a religion, they are a science of mind.” These 26 principles can give depth and heart to human relationships. Here are a few of the principles.

Principle 1: See the inner nobility and beauty of all human beings.

Principle 2: Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things.

Principle 7: Mindful attention to any experience is liberating. Mindfulness brings perspective, balance, and freedom. A major portion of the book is devoted to mindfulness, which the author defines as “. . . a non-judging and respectful awareness.” “Healing,” he says, “occurs

as we move from the realm of concepts to the world of direct experience.” In the section on mindfulness, he describes four principles of mindful transformation that are often taught with the acronym RAIN. These four principles are recognition, acceptance, investigation, and non-identification.

Recognition is the willingness to see what’s really happening in our lives. Acceptance is a willing movement of the heart to include whatever is before it. Investigation is “looking deeply” into the nature of our experience. Non-identification is to stop taking experiences as “me” or “mine,” to see that we *have* the experience rather than we *are* the experience.

Principle 10: Thoughts are often one-sided and untrue. Learn to be mindful of thought instead of being lost in it.

Principle 21: Virtue and integrity are necessary for genuine happiness. Guard your integrity with care. In exploring this principle, the author discusses action and character. “Developing virtue,” he says, “is a psychological necessity if we are to alleviate suffering. . . we are not functioning at a human level without basic integrity.”

Principle 22: Forgiveness is both necessary and possible. It is never too late to find forgiveness and start again.

Principle 26: A peaceful heart gives birth to love. When love meets suffering, it turns to compassion. When love meets happiness, it turns to joy.

This book is fresh and hopeful. It is alive with concepts and ideas that are both practical and inspiring. These are ideas that can enliven and deepen a therapy practice.

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