

Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart
Excerpts from Chapter 1, Did I Love Well?

In undertaking a spiritual life, what matters is simple: We must make certain that our path is connected with our heart... In the end, spiritual life is not a process of seeking or gaining some extraordinary condition or special powers. In fact, such seeking can take us away from ourselves. If we are not careful, we can easily find the great failures of our modern society - its ambition, materialism, and individual isolation - repeated in our spiritual life.

In beginning a genuine spiritual journey, we have to stay much closer to home, to focus directly on what is right here in front of us, to make sure that our path is connected with our deepest love...

When we ask, "Am I following a path with heart?" we discover that no one can define for us exactly what our path should be. Instead, we must allow the mystery and beauty of this question to resonate within our being. Then somewhere within us an answer will come and understanding will arise. If we are still and listen deeply, even for a moment, we will know if we are following a path with heart.

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have forgotten this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart. When we ask it about our current path, we must look at the values we have chosen to live by. Where do we put our time, our strength, our creativity, our love? We must look at our life without sentimentality, exaggeration, or idealism. Does what we are choosing reflect what we most deeply value?

Buddhist tradition teaches its followers to regard all life as precious...

To see the preciousness of all things, we must bring our full attention to life. Spiritual practice can bring us to this awareness... As the qualities of presence and simplicity begin to permeate more and more of our life, our inner love for the earth and all beings begins to express itself and brings our path alive...

To live a path with heart means to...allow the flavor of goodness to permeate our life. When we bring full attention to our acts, when we express our love and see the preciousness of life, the quality of goodness in us grows. A simple caring presence can begin to permeate more moments of our life. And so we should continually ask our own heart, What would it mean to live like this? Is the path, the way we have chosen to live our life, leading to this?

In the stress and complexity of our lives, we may forget our deepest intentions. But when people come to the end of their life and look back, the questions that they most often ask are not usually, "How much is in my bank account?" or "How many books did I write?" or "What did I build?" or the like. If you have the privilege of being with a person who is aware at the time of their death, you find the questions such a person asks are very simple: "Did I love well?" "Did I live fully?" "Did I learn to let go?"

These simple questions go to the very center of spiritual life. When we consider loving well and living fully, we can see the ways our attachments and fears have limited us, and we can see the many opportunities for our hearts to open. Have we let ourselves love the people around us, our family, our community, the earth upon which we live? And, did we also learn to let go? Did we learn to live through the changes of life with grace, wisdom, and compassion? Have we learned to forgive and live from the spirit of the heart instead of the spirit of judgment?