

A  
Lamp  
in the  
Darkness

Illuminating the Path Through  
Difficult Times

Jack Kornfield



**SOUNDS TRUE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Wisdom of Our Difficulties

*There is praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Did you think this would not happen to you?*

The Buddha

If you're reading these words, you've probably hit hard times. Perhaps you've lost a loved one, or maybe you've lost your job, or received a difficult diagnosis, or someone close to you has. Maybe you're divorcing or you're in bankruptcy or you've been injured, or your life is falling apart in any number of ways. Maybe daily life itself has become too much for you . . . or not enough. But even in the best of times there's plenty to worry about: seemingly endless wars and violence, racism, our accelerating environmental destruction. In difficult times, personally or collectively, we often begin to wonder not only how we can get through this difficult patch: we begin to question existence itself.

### **YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

One of the most difficult things about hard times is that we often feel that we are going through them alone. But we are not alone. In fact, your life itself is only possible because of the thousands of generations before you, survivors who have carried the lamp of humanity through difficult times from one generation to another. Even Jesus had hard times, and Buddha did as well. At times they were hounded, threatened, physically attacked, and

*It's not about you.  
It's about us.  
Life is difficult  
for everyone.*

despised. Yet their gifts outshone all their difficulties. And now, as you read these words, you can feel yourself as part of the stream of humanity walking together, finding ways to carry the lamp of wisdom and courage and compassion through difficult times.

Several years ago I was giving a talk on compassion with Pema Chödrön in a large hall in San Francisco filled with at least three thousand participants. At one point a young woman stood up and spoke in the most raw and painful way about her partner's suicide several weeks before. She was experiencing a gamut of complex emotions, such as agonizing grief and confusion, guilt and anger, loss and fear. As I listened to her I could feel her loneliness, and so I asked the group when she finished, "How many of you in this room have experienced the suicide of someone in your family, or someone really close to you?" More than two hundred people stood up. I asked her to look around the room at the eyes of those who had gone through a similar tragedy and survived. As they gazed at one another, everyone in the room could feel the presence of true compassion, as if we were in a great temple. We all felt the suffering that is part of our humanity, and part of the mystery that we share. But it's not only in great difficulties like the suicide of a loved one that we touch this truth: in the midst of our daily confusions, self-doubts, conflicts, and fears, we need support, reminders to trust in ourselves. We can trust. We were designed to journey through the full measure of beauty and sorrows in life and survive.

## **YOUR DIFFICULTIES ARE YOUR PATH**

Grief and loss and suffering, even depression and spiritual crisis—the dark nights of the soul—only worsen when we try to ignore or deny or avoid them. The healing journey begins when we face them and learn how to work with them.

When we stop fighting against our difficulties and find the strength to meet our demons and difficulties head on, we often find that we emerge stronger and more humble and grounded than we were before. To survive our difficulties is to become initiated into the fraternity of wisdom.

The real tragedy is when we refuse to acknowledge and respect our own suffering, and instead spread it unconsciously to others. As the Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel has written, “Suffering confers neither privileges nor rights; it all depends on how one uses it. If you use it to increase the anguish of others, you are degrading, even betraying it. . . And yet the day will come . . . when we shall all understand that suffering can elevate man as well as diminish him.”<sup>1</sup>

*The warrior in  
your heart says  
stand your ground.  
Feel the survival  
of a thousand  
years of ancestors  
in your muscles  
and your blood.  
You have all the  
support you need  
in your bones.*

## AWAKEN THE ONE WHO KNOWS

The practices included in *A Lamp in the Darkness* are not positive thinking, quick fixes, or simplistic self-help strategies to navigate temporary difficult times. The practices here are profound tools for doing the work of the soul. They awaken your inner knowing. If you pay careful attention in the midst of your crises, you will begin to sense a witnessing consciousness, a wise presence inside of you that could be called “the one who knows.” This knowing presence is consciousness itself, present in every moment of your life, even when it feels far away from you. Even in the toughest times of illness and loss, in your deepest depressions and griefs, underneath even your most catastrophic challenges and fears, the one who knows in you remains calm and clear. It already accepts whatever is going on. It sees beyond the immediate situation to something much larger. It knows that whatever change has come—no matter how much of a surprise it is to you—was

*Loss and betrayal tear  
open the heart.  
Look through this  
gate for the wisdom  
that lies there.  
What matters now?  
What would the wise  
ones do now?*

going to happen. It knows that whatever is, *is*—whether we accept it or not. The one who knows is even often able to see grim humor in the most difficult situations. And it knows long before we do that the end of our suffering begins when we turn to face our suffering and embrace its truth and healing wisdom.

But how we can find this “one who knows” in the midst of our most overwhelming difficulties? Go to the mirror. Look at your face. You will see someone who looks older than you looked several years ago, although inside you don’t feel any older. This is because it is only your body that has aged. The timeless awareness through which you see your body is the one who knows. Your body is only a temporary vessel for this awareness. It is a physical container for the undying consciousness of the one who knows.

## **LIVE IN THE PRESENT**

You can learn to trust the one who knows, to experience consciousness as the space of awareness that is unchanging, independent of circumstance. It is open and clear and wise. Resting in the one who knows you can step outside of time, outside of endless worries about the future and the reruns of the past. The one who knows abides in the present moment.

The present moment is all we have, and it becomes the doorway to true calm, your healing refuge. The only place you can love, or heal, or awaken is here and now, the eternal present. Create life a day at a time. You cannot know the future. It is a mystery. But you can plant beautiful seeds here and now and learn to tend them with the love and courage and survival instinct that is inborn in you. Somerset Maugham once said, “There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one

knows what they are.” He wrote marvelous novels, the only way we can, a page at a time.

Whether your suffering stems from cancer or divorce or loss or conflict, the one who knows understands that it is only in the present that you can heal. The one who knows has the courage to acknowledge the way things are, and to care and love and trust, no matter what. The one who knows sees the bigger picture behind every illness, loss, and death. Wisdom knows that although you may feel that your life or another’s life is ending, new life is always growing in and around you. The universe continues to expand, the Earth continues to turn through the seasons, the soil continues to bring forth new growth. Even in the moment of your eventual death, mothers will be giving birth, bringing new hope, love, difficulty, and possibility into the world.

Becoming aware and mindful, resting in the one who knows in the midst of your struggles, is not some magical cure. Your problems will not automatically and easily disappear. Being anxious and sad, angry and fearful, hurt, lost, and even despairing in difficult times is part of the natural process of suffering. Even being overwhelmed by challenging emotions is a natural part of the journey. If you judge yourself against some impossible ideal of how you think you “should” be feeling and acting as you struggle, you’ll only add to your suffering.

Being alive is finding ourselves in the midst of a great and mysterious paradox. The one who knows realizes that there are ten thousand joys and sorrows in every life, and at one time or another we will be touched by all of them. We will all experience birth and death, success and loss, love

*If you can sit quietly after difficult news; if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm; if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy; if you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate; if you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill; if you can always find contentment just where you are: you are probably a dog.*



*Right now, how  
can these difficult  
emotions and thoughts  
and sensations become  
your path  
to liberation?*

and heartbreak, joy and despair. And in every moment of your life there are millions of humans just like you all over the world who are being confronted by situations that are equally overwhelming and are struggling to somehow learn how to survive them. As George Washington Carver said, “How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong . . . because some day in life you will have been all of these.”

## YOU WILL SURVIVE

One of the world’s greatest examples of how to survive difficult times is Nelson Mandela, the first president of modern South Africa. After twenty-seven years of imprisonment on Robben Island, he remained unbowed and dignified, gracious, tender and kind, and curious about everything that was happening around him. The one who knows inside him never took what was happening to him personally. In this way he was able to maintain his freedom even while in bondage, to retain his dignity even in the most degrading conditions, to continue practicing compassion in the face of hostility, and to respond to the hatefulness that surrounded him with an unwavering love. Although a solitary man jailed in a distant country, Nelson Mandela has become an inspiration for millions of people suffering through less dramatic but equally challenging situations. The one who knows in Nelson Mandela is the same one who knows inside you. You were born with the same potential for wisdom, the same insight, the same strength and love, all that you need to carry you through the difficulties that you encounter.

To heal, you must remember who you really are. Then no matter what happens to you, you can rely on this innate courage, you can trust your

own wise heart because nothing and no one can take them from you. You are free like Nelson Mandela.

One of my spiritual teachers, the Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, used to ask me, “Which has had more value in your life, where have you grown more and learned more, where have you become more wise, where have you learned patience, understanding, equanimity, and forgiveness—in your hard times, or the good ones?” When we come to understand the paradox that what we most value in our lives was often born out of conflict and struggle, we can begin to get a glimmer that perhaps one day we may begin to embrace our difficulties and find grace in them, even if that day is not today.

*As you become intimate with your suffering, your heart grows tender.*

Even the worst losses become workable over time. They become part of your life story and destiny; they become an important part of who you have become. Through surviving our difficulties, tenderness and compassion naturally arise. Your hardships are not only something intensely personal and intimate but also something you share with the entire world. Everything you have survived is responsible for who you are today. It is part of your heritage and cannot be taken from you; it lives in you in the same mysterious way that everything and everyone you have ever lost remains alive and present in your heart.

It’s important to remember that even with the best of healing practices, your personal healing may not be easy. Turning to face difficult times can bring us face to face with the larger pains and fears beneath our grieving, or open a well of loneliness we have been running from our whole lives. But the practices in this program are designed to work with it all, to return you to acceptance and forgiveness and compassion—especially for yourself, so that you can hold everything in *yourself* with great mercy through these difficult times.

*You may not see  
it now, but this  
very difficulty will  
strengthen you. Your  
heart will grow wiser,  
your spirit stronger.  
You already know  
this. You can even  
begin to see the ways  
that this is true.*

## OPEN TO VASTNESS

These practices will reconnect you to a bigger perspective of space and timelessness, so you can see everything with the eyes of the one who knows life's vastness and mystery.

You've had many tastes of the ever-present mystery and beauty of existence: when you've fallen in love or been present at the birth of a child, or in the timeless silence when you first saw the Grand Canyon or looked through a telescope at the stars and galaxies. In those moments your concerns were not with your difficulties. You were a conscious part of the miraculous eternal present moment.

Eternity is here, always, waiting in the present moment.

We must learn how to return to the reality of the present moment even in our most difficult times. In the present moment we can learn to see clearly and kindly. With the great power of this mindfulness, we can become fully present to the unbearable beauty and the inevitable tragedy that makes up every human life. And we can honorably and fully experience this one and only life that we have been given, with all its ups and downs. In my own life, I try to remember the words many of us have heard from the Ojibway Indians: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

## TRUST

The practices offered here are given with an open hand. They can bring healing and transformation to both your body and your mind. They will give you the tools for trusting the natural unfolding of your life and reconnect you to the unstoppable power of renewal that is always waiting to break through, no matter what your current difficulties. Try each of them and

trust yourself to know which ones suit your heart and your current predicament. Perhaps others will become more useful to you at other times.

Remember, too, that although these practices can bring genuine healing from your present difficulties, more difficulties will come. It is the nature of life for difficulties to arise, and there are new challenging times yet ahead. This is our human lot, and our calling. It is how we grow. As Michael Jordan said, “I’ve missed more than nine thousand shots in my basketball career, I’ve lost almost three hundred games, twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over again in my life, but I still keep going out on the court. And that’s why I succeed.”

By learning the skills in this book, I hope that when future difficulties arise, your path of healing will not be as long or dark. For just as it is certain that each life will include suffering, it is also true that in every moment there is the possibility of transcending your difficulties to discover the heart’s eternal freedom. Your unshakable spirit waits to rearise. For, as the poet Pablo Neruda has written, “You can pick all the flowers, but you can’t stop the spring.”

*As you go through this difficult time, sense how many other people on this earth are facing the same problems: loss, conflict, divorce. Feel your common humanity with them. When you can awaken sympathy, courage often follows.*