

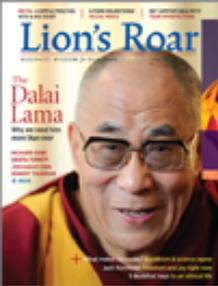
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Turn Your Thinking Upside Down

BY PEMA CHÖDRÖN | JULY 14, 2017



We base our lives on seeking happiness and avoiding suffering, but the best thing we can do for ourselves—and for the planet—is to turn this whole way of thinking upside down. Pema Chödrön shows us Buddhism's radical side.

Photo by Tachina Lee.

On a very basic level all beings think that they should be happy. When life becomes difficult or painful, we feel that something has gone wrong. This wouldn't be a big problem except for the fact that when we feel something's gone wrong, we're willing to do anything to feel OK again. Even start a fight.

According to the Buddhist teachings, difficulty is inevitable in human life. For one thing, we cannot escape the reality of death. But there are also the realities of aging, of illness, of not getting what we want, and of getting what we don't want. These kinds of difficulties are facts of life. Even if you were the Buddha himself, if you were a fully enlightened person, you

would experience death, illness, aging, and sorrow at losing what you love. All of these things would happen to you. If you got burned or cut, it would hurt.

But the Buddhist teachings also say that this is not really what causes us misery in our lives. What causes misery is always trying to get away from the facts of life, always trying to avoid pain and seek happiness—this sense of ours that there could be lasting security and happiness available to us if we could only do the right thing.

“ *Suffering can humble us. Even the most arrogant among us can be softened by the loss of someone dear.* ”

In this very lifetime we can do ourselves and this planet a great favor and turn this very old way of thinking upside down. As Shantideva, author of *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, points out, suffering has a great deal to teach us. If we use the opportunity when it arises, suffering will motivate us to look for answers. Many people, including myself, came to the spiritual path because of deep unhappiness. Suffering can also teach us empathy for others who are in the same boat. Furthermore, suffering can humble us. Even the most arrogant among us can be softened by the loss of someone dear.

Yet it is so basic in us to feel that things should go well for us, and that if we start to feel depressed, lonely, or inadequate, there's been some kind of mistake or we've lost it. In reality, when you feel depressed, lonely, betrayed, or any unwanted feelings, this is an important moment on the spiritual path. This is where real transformation can take place.

As long as we're caught up in always looking for certainty and happiness, rather than honoring the taste and smell and quality of exactly what is happening, as long as we're always running away from discomfort, we're going to be caught in a cycle of unhappiness and disappointment, and we will feel weaker and weaker. This way of seeing helps us to develop inner strength.

And what's especially encouraging is the view that inner strength is available to us at just the moment when we think we've hit the bottom, when things are at their worst. Instead of asking ourselves, “How can I find security and happiness?” we could ask ourselves, “Can I touch the center of my pain? Can I sit with suffering, both yours and mine, without trying to make it go away? Can I stay present to the ache of loss or disgrace—disappointment in all its many forms—and let it open me?” This is the trick.

There are various ways to view what happens when we feel threatened. In times of distress—of rage, of frustration, of failure—we can look at how we get hooked and how *shenpa* escalates. The usual translation of *shenpa* is “attachment,” but this doesn’t adequately express the full meaning. I think of *shenpa* as “getting hooked.” Another definition, used by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, is the “charge”—the charge behind our thoughts and words and actions, the charge behind “like” and “don’t like.”

It can also be helpful to shift our focus and look at how we put up barriers. In these moments we can observe how we withdraw and become self-absorbed. We become dry, sour, afraid; we crumble, or harden out of fear that more pain is coming. In some old familiar way, we automatically erect a protective shield and our self-centeredness intensifies.

“ *We can become intimate with just how we hide out, doze off, freeze up. And that intimacy, coming to know these barriers so well, is what begins to dismantle them.* ”

But this is the very same moment when we could do something different. Right on the spot, through practice, we can get very familiar with the barriers that we put up around our hearts and around our whole being. We can become intimate with just how we hide out, doze off, freeze up. And that intimacy, coming to know these barriers so well, is what begins to dismantle them. Amazingly, when we give them our full attention they start to fall apart.

Ultimately all the practices I have mentioned are simply ways we can go about dissolving these barriers. Whether it’s learning to be present through sitting meditation, acknowledging *shenpa*, or practicing patience, these are methods for dissolving the protective walls that we automatically put up.

When we’re putting up the barriers and the sense of “me” as separate from “you” gets stronger, right there in the midst of difficulty and pain, the whole thing could turn around simply by not erecting barriers; simply by staying open to the difficulty, to the feelings that you’re going through; simply by not talking to ourselves about what’s happening. That is a revolutionary step. Becoming intimate with pain is the key to changing at the core of our being—staying open to everything we experience, letting the sharpness of difficult times pierce us to the heart, letting these times open us, humble us, and make us wiser and more brave.

Let difficulty transform you. And it will. In my experience, we just need help in learning how not to run away.

If we're ready to try staying present with our pain, one of the greatest supports we could ever find is to cultivate the warmth and simplicity of *bodhichitta*. The word *bodhichitta* has many translations, but probably the most common one is “awakened heart.” The word refers to a longing to wake up from ignorance and delusion in order to help others do the same. Putting our personal awakening in a larger—even planetary—framework makes a significant difference. It gives us a vaster perspective on why we would do this often difficult work.

There are two kinds of *bodhichitta*: relative and absolute. Relative *bodhichitta* includes compassion and *maitri*. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche translated *maitri* as “unconditional friendliness with oneself.” This unconditional friendliness means having an unbiased relationship with all the parts of your being. So, in the context of working with pain, this means making an intimate, compassionate heart-relationship with all those parts of ourselves we generally don't want to touch.

Some people find the teachings I offer helpful because I encourage them to be kind to themselves, but this does not mean pampering our neurosis. The kindness that I learned from my teachers, and that I wish so much to convey to other people, is kindness toward all qualities of our being. The qualities that are the toughest to be kind to are the painful parts, where we feel ashamed, as if we don't belong, as if we've just blown it, when things are falling apart for us. *Maitri* means sticking with ourselves when we don't have anything, when we feel like a loser. And it becomes the basis for extending the same unconditional friendliness to others.

If there are whole parts of yourself that you are always running from, that you even feel justified in running from, then you're going to run from anything that brings you into contact with your feelings of insecurity.

“ *I'm here to tell you that the path to peace is right there, when you want to get away.* ”

And have you noticed how often these parts of ourselves get touched? The closer you get to a situation or a person, the more these feelings arise. Often when you're in a relationship it starts off great, but when it gets intimate and begins to bring out your neurosis, you just want to get out of there.

So I'm here to tell you that the path to peace is right there, when you want to get away. You can cruise through life not letting anything touch you, but if you really want to live fully, if you want to enter into life, enter into genuine relationships with other people, with animals, with the world situation, you're definitely going to have the experience of feeling provoked, of getting hooked, of shenpa. You're not just going to feel bliss. The message is that when those feelings emerge, this is not a failure. This is the chance to cultivate maitri, unconditional friendliness toward your perfect and imperfect self.

Relative bodhichitta also includes awakening compassion. One of the meanings of compassion is "suffering with," being willing to suffer with other people. This means that to the degree you can work with the wholeness of your being—your prejudices, your feelings of failure, your self-pity, your depression, your rage, your addictions—the more you will connect with other people out of that wholeness. And it will be a relationship between equals. You'll be able to feel the pain of other people as your own pain. And you'll be able to feel your own pain and know that it's shared by millions.

Absolute bodhichitta, also known as *shunyata*, is the open dimension of our being, the completely wide-open heart and mind. Without labels of "you" and "me," "enemy" and "friend," absolute bodhichitta is always here. Cultivating absolute bodhichitta means having a relationship with the world that is nonconceptual, that is unprejudiced, having a direct, unedited relationship with reality.

That's the value of sitting meditation practice. You train in coming back to the unadorned present moment again and again. Whatever thoughts arise in your mind, you regard them with equanimity and you learn to let them dissolve. There is no rejection of the thoughts and emotions that come up; rather, we begin to realize that thoughts and emotions are not as solid as we always take them to be.

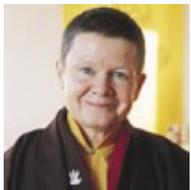
It takes bravery to train in unconditional friendliness, it takes bravery to train in "suffering with," it takes bravery to stay with pain when it arises and not run or erect barriers. It takes bravery to not bite the hook and get swept away. But as we do, the absolute bodhichitta realization, the experience of how open and unfettered our minds really are, begins to dawn on us. As a result of becoming more comfortable with the ups and the downs of our ordinary human life, this realization grows stronger.

We may still get betrayed, may still be hated. We may still feel confused and sad. What we won't do is bite the hook.

“We start with taking a close look at our predictable tendency to get hooked, to separate ourselves, to withdraw into ourselves and put up walls. As we become intimate with these tendencies, they gradually become more transparent, and we see that there’s actually space, there is unlimited, accommodating space. This does not mean that then you live in lasting happiness and comfort. That spaciousness includes pain.

We may still get betrayed, may still be hated. We may still feel confused and sad. What we won’t do is bite the hook. Pleasant happens. Unpleasant happens. Neutral happens. What we gradually learn is to not move away from being fully present. We need to train at this very basic level because of the widespread suffering in the world. If we aren’t training inch by inch, one moment at a time, in overcoming our fear of pain, then we’ll be very limited in how much we can help. We’ll be limited in helping ourselves, and limited in helping anybody else. So let’s start with ourselves, just as we are, here and now.

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ABOUT PEMA CHÖDRÖN

With her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, Pema Chödrön is today’s most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *The Places that Scare You*, and other important books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can be opportunities for awakening. She serves as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey Monastery in Nova Scotia and is a student of Dzigar Kongtrul, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and the late Chögyam Trungpa. For more, visit pemachodronfoundation.org.

TOPICS: Bodhichitta, Pema Chödrön, Shambhala Sun - May '07, Shantideva, Suffering

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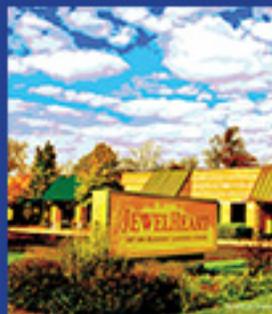


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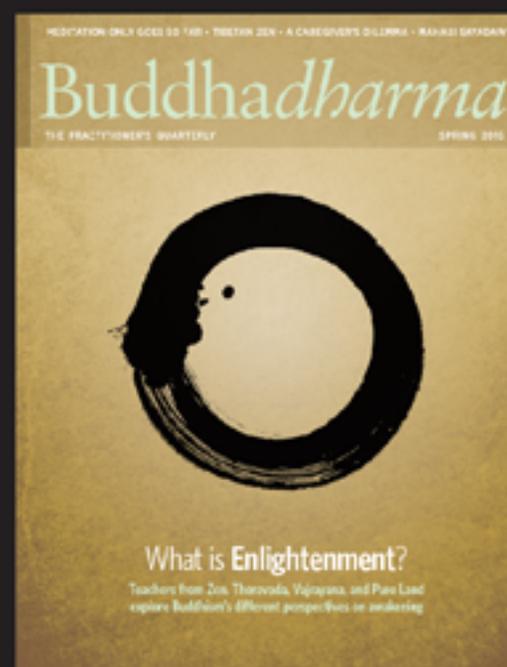
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