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“You can connect with the mind of nowness at any moment”

Pema Chödrön’s 4 Keys to

Waking Up



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Pema Chödrön on 4 Keys to Waking Up

BY ANDREA MILLER

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ABOUT A YEAR and a half before Ani Pema Chodron teaches a program, she has to come up with a title for it. Now up on the stage at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, she quips that she never knows so far in advance what she's going to teach, so she just comes up with something she figures she'll inevitably say something about. Her title for this weekend is "Walk the Walk: Working with Habits & Emotions in Daily Life."

As Ani Pema sees it, walking the walk is about being genuine; that is, not being a fake spiritual person.

"You got any idea what I mean by that?" she asks the retreatants. "One attribute that can be true of fake spiritual people is that they wear fake spiritual clothing," she says, taking a light crack at her own tidy burgundy robes. But what being a fake spiritual person really means, she explains, "is that you're suffering a lot and you want to mask your suffering with some kind of spiritual glow. You're trying to transcend the messiness of life by being beatific and radiant."

In contrast, Ani Pema continues, "Walking the walk means you're very genuine and down to earth. You take the teachings as good medicine for the things that are confusing to you and for the suffering of your life."

This weekend, there are 560 retreatants present, with an additional 1,200 people dialing in to the live stream from around the globe. As Ani Pema points out, most of us are attending because of our issues—our anger or addiction, our grief or loneliness. There are people here who are struggling with illness; there are people here who've lost their job. One woman is living with the memory of waking up to find her infant cold and blue. Someone

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else is trying to come to terms with her son's homelessness. Every single one of us wants to hear something that is going to be of value in our life.

Over the weekend, Ani Pema will teach us about four qualities that are key to waking up. She feels they are critical for walking the walk and experiencing genuine transformation. Each of her four talks will focus on one of these qualities.

1 Stabilize Your Mind

When Ani Pema's late teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, was a child in Tibet, his primary teacher was a famous master named Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. One day, Ani Pema tells us, Trungpa Rinpoche went to his teacher's

"In the West, they use this to eat," Kongtrul Rinpoche explained. "They poke it into meat and then they use it to lift the meat up and put it in their mouth. Someday, you're going to go where people eat with these things." At this point, Kongtrul Rinpoche smiled broadly at his prediction. "You might just find," he concluded, "that they're a lot more interested in staying asleep than in waking up."

Ani Pema believes that Kongtrul Rinpoche had a point: there is a lot of cultural support for unconsciousness in this land of forks. It's human nature to want to be distracted from uncomfortable, painful feelings such as boredom, restlessness, or bitterness. And now that we have such a multitude of ways to distract ourselves, from texting to television, it's even more challenging to be awake and fully present.



Pema Chödrön with her friend and co-teacher Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel.

room, where he found him sitting in front of a window with the soft morning light falling on his face. In his hands, Kongtrul Rinpoche held a metal object that was shaped like a peculiar comb and was the color of the silver bowls on shrines. It was something Trungpa Rinpoche had never seen before.

Even when we turn off the ringer, our cell-phone still vibrates and the pull to check it is almost irresistible.

In the face of all this temptation, stabilizing the mind is the basis for showing up for our own life.

"You could call it training or taming the mind to stay present," Ani Pema says,

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Autumn at Omega Institute.

PHOTO BY MAT MCDERMOTT

"but a more accurate way of describing it is strengthening the mind. That's because we are strengthening qualities we already have, rather than training in something that we have to bring in from the outside."

Throughout life, we have trained in distracting ourselves, so going unconscious feels like our natural MO. Our minds, however, have two essential qualities we can always draw on to help us wake up: being present and knowing what's happening, moment by moment. To strengthen these natural qualities of mind, we can use meditation.

This weekend, Buddhist teacher Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel, author of *The Power of an Open Question*, is leading us in our meditation sessions. Having spent more than six years of her life in retreat, she's had ample practice. *Shamatha* meditation—calm abiding—is the technique she's teaching, and she breaks it down into three parts: body, breath, and mind.

"When you're meditating, the body should have some energy in it—it's not slumped over," Elizabeth says. "But also the body should be natural. Often we think we have to 'assume the position,' and sometimes the position we assume is quite religious, kind of stiff."

"Meditation is really just learning to enjoy your experience, so you don't have to tense up. Don't make meditation a project like everything else. The word 'natural' is very important. Yesterday, I was walking around Omega, and it's so beautiful here. It feels like the last red leaf is about to drop, but it's still there. We appreciate nature because it's so uncontrived and unselfconscious. Bring that to mind and know that the body itself has its own intelligence."

Next we have the breath, Elizabeth continues. "We breathe in. There's this natural pause, and then the outbreath. There's

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—ELIZABETH MATTIS-NAMGYEL

“When you feel bad, let it be your link to others’ suffering.
When you feel good, let it be your link with others’ joy.”

—PEMA CHÖDRÖN



another pause. Then again, breathing in.” But don’t imagine that just because we’re focusing on our breath that everything else will go blank and our senses will close down. The breath is simply what we keep bringing the mind back to.

“The mind will get lost because it’s habituated to escaping the present moment,” Elizabeth explains. “So when you start getting lost in the activity of the mind, or when you see yourself bracing against experience in some way, be joyful because you’ve noticed! Don’t be hard on yourself. You get lost and you keep coming back—this is what’s supposed to happen.”

According to Elizabeth, the key to shamatha practice is to approach it with a bit of fierceness—not aggressive fierceness, but the fierceness of true commitment. Shamatha is a very basic practice, she says. Don’t, however, underestimate it. It’s extremely powerful.

Elizabeth shares with us the story of a friend of hers who suffered abuse as a child. This woman ended up living on the streets and selling drugs to support her own habit. Then she got arrested and was sent to a high-security prison, where she got put into solitary confinement for a year and a half.

One day, she was outside her cell for a brief break when she happened to meet a cook who worked in the prison kitchen. They talked for just a moment, but in that time he told her that if she didn’t learn to train her mind, she would go crazy in solitary confinement.

“I don’t know how to meditate,” the prisoner told the cook. “I only know how to count and pace.” That’s fine, he counseled. Just focus on that. And so she did. For a year and half, she could only walk seven steps in each direction, but counting and pacing was her calm abiding meditation. Today, says Elizabeth, “She’s organized and beautiful and caring and has a good relationship to her world.”

“In the Buddhist tradition,” Elizabeth explains, “we say that the untamed mind is like a limbless blind person trying to

ride a wild horse. There’s not much choice in just letting that situation continue. You create choice by reining in the mind.”

2 Make Friends with Yourself

One of Pema Chödrön’s students wrote her a letter. “You talk about gentleness all the time,” he began, “but secretly, I always thought that gentleness was for girls.” When Ani Pema recounts this story, the retreatants—predominantly female—laugh. Unsurprisingly, once this student tried being gentle with himself, he had a change of heart. In the face of things he found embarrassing or humiliating, he realized that it takes a lot of courage to be gentle.

Ani Pema points out that practicing meditation can actually ramp up our habitual self-denigration. This is because, in the process of stabilizing the mind, we become more aware of traits in ourselves that we don’t like, whether it’s cruelty, cynicism, or selfishness. Then we need to look deeper, with even more clarity. When we examine our addictions, for example, we need to be able to see the sadness that’s behind having another drink, the loneliness behind another joint.

This brings us to unconditional friendship with ourselves, the second quality that Ani Pema teaches is critical for waking up. As she explains it, “When you have a true friend, you stick together year after year, but you don’t put your friend up on a pedestal and think that they’re perfect. You two have had fights. You’ve seen them be really petty, you’ve seen them mean, and they’ve also seen you in all different states of mind. Yet you remain friends, and there’s even something about the fact that you know each other so well and still love each other that strengthens the friendship. Your friendship is based on knowing each other fully and still loving each other.”

Unconditional friendship with yourself has the same flavor as the deep friendships you have with others. You know yourself but you’re kind to yourself. You even love



Pema Chödrön and the Shambhala Sun’s Andrea Miller.

yourself when you think you’ve blown it once again. In fact, Ani Pema teaches, it is only through unconditional friendship with yourself that your issues will budge. Repressing your tendencies, shaming yourself, calling yourself bad—these will never help you realize transformation.

Keep in mind that the transformation Ani Pema is talking about is not going from being a bad person to being a good person. It is a process of getting smarter about what helps and what hurts; what de-escalates suffering and escalates it; what increases happiness and what obscures it. It is about loving yourself so much that you don’t want to make yourself suffer anymore.

Ani Pema wraps up her Saturday-morning talk by taking questions. One woman who comes up to the mic says she’s been on the spiritual path for a while, yet it doesn’t seem to be helping her. Ani Pema—as she always does—fully engages with the questioner.

“Do you have a regular meditation practice?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“And how does that feel these days?”

“It feels hurried.”

“Hurried?”

“I have a child with disabilities, so meditation has to be fit in. I can’t just decide to go sit down. It has to be set up.”

“I get it,” Ani Pema says slowly. “So, okay, that’s how it is currently—uncomfortable, hurried. Things as they are.” Then she comes back to what we’ve been talking about this morning: unconditional friendship. Ani Pema’s advice is this: don’t reject what you see in yourself; embrace it instead. Feeling Hurried Buddha, Feeling Cut Off from Nature Buddha, Feeling No Compassion Buddha—recognize the buddha in each feeling.

3 Be Free from Fixed Mind

Nestled in the Hudson Valley, Omega Institute is like camp for spiritually minded adults. In the mornings, I attend a yoga or tai chi class before the sun comes up. In the evenings, I go to the Ram Dass Library and read on a window seat

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PHOTO BY MAT MODERMOTT

lined with cushions patterned with elephants. Other retreatants choose the sauna or the sanctuary, the basketball or tennis courts, the lively café or the liquid-glass lake. And the food is good, too—healthy dishes such as black beans over rice, spiced with salsa verde and topped with dollops of sour cream and sprinkles of cheese.

It's Saturday afternoon and, having indulged too much at lunch, I'm in a cozy stupor when Ani Pema asks us all to stand up. We're going to do an exercise. Inhaling, we're going to raise our hands high in the air. Then exhaling with a "hah," we're going to quickly bring our arms down and slap our palms against our thighs. Simple enough, but the result is surprising. Although those are *my* hands making contact with *my* thighs, the jolt is unexpected. Suddenly, if just for the briefest of moments, I feel lucid, totally fresh. This, says Ani Pema, is an experience of being free from fixed mind.

Fixed mind is stuck, inflexible. It's a mind that closes down, that is living with blinders on. Though it's a common state in everyday life, fixed mind is particularly easy to spot in the realm of politics.

"Say you're an environmentalist," Ani Pema tells us. "What you're working for is really important, but when fixed mind comes in, the other side is the enemy. You become prejudiced and closed, and this makes you less effective as an activist."

On the spiritual path, being free from fixed mind is the third

necessary quality for waking up. Even if we aren't practitioners, life itself gives us endless opportunities to experience this freedom. These, for instance, are all things that have stopped my mind: loud, jolting noises; intense beauty, such as the sudden glimpse of an enormous orange moon; surrealist art, like Salvador Dali's telephone with a lobster inexplicably perched on top.

"The experience of being free of fixed mind often happens because of trauma or crisis," Ani Pema says. A sudden death or tragedy takes place, and on a dime we see that things are not the way we usually perceive them. Ani Pema tells the story of one woman who, on September 11, 2001, experienced a profound gap in just this way. Distracted and rushed, she was heading to work with her arms full of papers for a presentation she was about to give. Then she came up out of the subway and saw the destruction. The air was filled with papers like the ones she was holding—all the paperwork that had been filling up drawers in offices like hers. Her mind stopped.

When Ani Pema first started practicing meditation, she felt poverty-stricken because everyone in her circle was always talking about "the gap." That's the open awareness that's revealed when we're free from fixed mind, but she never experienced it and whenever she admitted this to someone, they'd smile smugly. "You will," they'd say.

As she understood it, the gap was supposed to be something experienced in meditation, yet, she says, "What was happening with me was pretty much *yak-yak-yak*, intermingled with strong

reactivity and emotional responses. But then I was in the meditation hall for a month. It was summer and there was this continual hum of the air conditioner. It never stopped, so after a while you didn't hear it anymore. I was sitting there one day and somebody turned the air conditioner off. That was it! Gap!"

This simple experience gave Ani Pema a reference point for being free from fixed mind. It shifted her meditation practice and her life. "I'd be having a conversation with someone," she explains. "I'd be getting all heated up and I would begin to have this sense of my mouth and my mind going *yak-yak-yak*. Then I got the hang of how I could just drop it. I could give myself a break and experience being free from fixed mind. Of course, the mind starts up again, just the way the air conditioner did. But once you've had the experience of this gap, or pause, you begin to notice that it happens a lot automatically."

A practitioner's work is noticing the gaps and appreciating them. In every action, every sound, every sight and smell, there can be some space, and in it there is wonder or awe at every—supposedly—mundane turn. "The potential of your human life is so enormous and so vast," says Ani Pema.

At the end of her talk everyone bows, and I concentrate on letting the gesture be a doorway—a simple thing that can expand. There is the delicate wonder of my fingers curled lightly around my thighs and the solemn wonder of my back folding softly forward. There's the awe of again sitting up straight and the awe of standing up and the awe of streaming toward the door with the other retreatants.

Outside, the sunlight is beginning to weaken into pale pink as I find the trailhead near the meditation hall. Until dinner, I listen to the wonder of my sneakers crunching and rustling as I walk through fallen oak leaves.

4 Take Care of Others

My fellow retreatants Lelia Calder and Cynthia Ronan are sharing a cabin, and I pop by to ask them about their experience with Pema Chödrön's teachings. Lelia, a resident of Pennsylvania, has been a dedicated student since the mid-nineties. Cynthia, from Ohio, has never before been to a retreat with Ani Pema but has been reading her books for the past five years.

When I ask Lelia for an example of how Pema Chödrön's teachings have helped her in life, she laughs. "There have been so many! I wish I could think of one that is very dramatic but a lot of the time, they're just so simple. We make things very complicated, but I think one of the things about dharma is that it really is simple. When things get simple, they seem like no big deal. Yet it is a big deal to be simple and direct and uncomplicated—to not make a big problem out of your life."

Cynthia says the teachings strike a chord because she can relate to Pema Chödrön's life experiences. Ani Pema frequently talks about how it was her second divorce that took her to her edge and brought her to the Buddhist path; Cynthia also endured a painful separation.

"There were times when I literally felt, I don't know what to

do,” says Cynthia. “I don’t know how to get off the floor right now. But because of Pema’s teachings, I learned that I could just be there. It was great to have someone say, ‘Yeah, you’re on the floor! I’ve been on the floor, too. And you can stay there. Just stop the story line. If you stop it for two seconds, you’ve moved forward.’”

Meredith Monk is a renowned composer and performer who is a longtime student of Pema Chödrön’s. When I interview her under the umbrella of a tree, she tells me how Ani Pema helped her gain a wider perspective after her partner’s death.

“When we’re in very painful circumstances,” Meredith explains, “there’s a way we can see that those circumstances are part of the big flow of life. At the same moment that you’re having that pain, there are millions of other people who are having that same kind of pain. There are millions of other people sitting in a hospital waiting room. There are millions of people who are dealing with grief.”

During her last talk of the weekend, Ani Pema states: “When you feel bad, let it be your link to others’ suffering. When you feel good, let it be your link with others’ joy.” This understanding that our sorrows and joys are not separate from the sorrows and joys of others is a key to the fourth and final quality that is critical for waking up: taking care of one another.

Sea anemones are open and soft, but if you put your finger anywhere near them, they close. This, says Ani Pema, is what we’re like. We can’t stand to see our flaws or failings; we can’t stand our feelings of boredom, disappointment, or fear; we can’t

stand to witness the suffering on the evening news or in the face of the homeless person on the corner. And so we shut down.

“That’s a kind of sanity,” Ani Pema posits. “Your body and mind intuitively know what’s enough. But in your heart, you have this strong aspiration that before you die—and hopefully even by next week—that you’ll become more capable of being open to other people and yourself. The attitude is one step at a time—four baby steps forward, two baby steps back. You can just allow it to be like that. Trust that you have to go at your own speed.”

Habitually, we allow our difficult emotions and experiences to isolate us from others. We feel alone in our depression or desperation or sadness. But when we use these to link us to everyone else in the world who’s suffering in the same way, we find that we are not alone, and we discover a deep well of compassion for others.

I take a long look around at my neighboring retreatants. Ani Pema, wrapping up the last talk of the weekend, is seated at the front with her glass of water and a flower arrangement. Flanking me, there is a middle-aged woman in a butterfly blouse and hoop earrings and a young woman in a hoodie and thumb ring. In front of me there is a man with a wisp of ponytail. Together, five-hundred-plus voices chant these four ancient lines from the Buddhist sage Shantideva:

*And now as long as space endures,
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world. ♦*