



5 Teachings
— of —
Pema Chödrön

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Cover photo by Andrea Roth



How to Tap Into the Natural Warmth of Your Heart

The death of her mother and the pain of seeing how we impose judgments onto the world, writes Pema Chödrön, gave rise to great compassion for our shared human predicament.

BEFORE WE CAN KNOW what natural warmth really is, often we must experience loss. We go along for years moving through our days, propelled by habit, taking life pretty much for granted. Then we or someone dear to us has an accident or gets seriously ill, and it's as if blinders have been removed from our eyes. We see the meaninglessness of so much of what we do and the emptiness of so much we cling to.

When my mother died and I was asked to go through her personal belongings, this awareness hit me hard. She had kept boxes of papers and trinkets that she treasured, things that she held on to through her many moves to smaller and smaller accommoda-

tions. They had represented security and comfort for her, and she had been unable to let them go. Now they were just boxes of stuff, things that held no meaning and represented no comfort or security to anyone. For me these were just empty objects, yet she had clung to them. Seeing this made me sad, and also thoughtful. After that I could never look at my own treasured objects in the same way. I had seen that things themselves are just what they are, neither precious nor worthless, and that all the labels, all our views and opinions about them, are arbitrary.

This was an experience of uncovering basic warmth. The loss of my mother and the pain of seeing so clearly how we impose judgments and values, prejudices, likes and dislikes, onto the world made me feel great compassion for our shared human predicament. I remember explaining to myself that the whole world consisted of people just like me who were making much ado about nothing and suffering from it tremendously.

When my second marriage fell apart, I tasted the rawness of grief, the utter groundlessness of sorrow, and all the protective shields I had always managed to keep in place fell to pieces. To my surprise, along with the pain, I also felt an uncontrived tenderness for other people. I remember the complete openness and gentleness I felt for those I met briefly in the post office or at the grocery store. I found myself approaching the people I encountered as just like me—fully alive, fully capable of meanness and kindness, of stumbling and falling down, and of standing up again. I'd never before experienced that much intimacy with unknown people. I could look into the eyes of store clerks and car mechanics, beggars and children, and feel our sameness. Somehow when my heart broke, the qualities of natural warmth, qualities like kindness and empathy and appreciation, just spontaneously emerged.

People say it was like that in New York City for a few weeks after September 11. When the world as they'd known it fell apart, a whole city full of people reached out to one another, took care of one another, and had no trouble looking into one another's eyes.

It is fairly common for crisis and pain to connect people with their capacity to love and care about one another. It is also common that this openness and compassion fades rather quickly, and that people then become afraid and far more guarded and closed than they ever were before. The question, then, is not only how to uncover our fundamental tenderness and warmth but also how to abide there with the fragile, often bittersweet vulnerability. How can we relax and open to the uncertainty of it?

The first time I met Dzigar Kongtrül, who is now my teacher, he spoke to me about the importance of pain. He had been living and teaching in North America for more than ten years and had come to realize that his students took the teachings and practices he gave them at a superficial level until they experienced pain in a way they couldn't shake. The Buddhist teachings were just a pastime, something to dabble in or use for relaxation, but when their

lives fell apart, the teachings and practices became as essential as food or medicine.

The natural warmth that emerges when we experience pain includes all the heart qualities: love, compassion, gratitude, tenderness in any form. It also includes loneliness, sorrow, and the shakiness of fear. Before these vulnerable feelings harden, before the storylines kick in, these generally unwanted feelings are pregnant with kindness, with openness and caring. These feelings that we've become so accomplished at avoiding can soften us, can transform us. The openheartedness of natural warmth is sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant—as “I want, I like,” and as the opposite. The practice is to train in not automatically fleeing from uncomfortable tenderness when it arises. With time we can embrace it just as we would the comfortable tenderness of loving-kindness and genuine appreciation.

It can become a daily practice to humanize the people that we pass on the street. When I do this, unknown people become very real for me. They come into focus as living beings who have joys and sorrows just like mine, as people who have parents and neighbors and friends and enemies, just like me. I also begin to have a heightened awareness of my own fears and judgments and prejudices that pop up out of nowhere about these ordinary people that I've never even met. ♦

From Pema Chödrön's Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves From Old Habits and Fears, available from Shambhala Publications.





Why Meditation Is Vital

Pema explains why it helps, and how to do it.

MEDITATION PRACTICE AWAKENS our trust that the wisdom and compassion that we need are already within us. It helps us to know ourselves: our rough parts and our smooth parts, our passion, aggression, ignorance, and wisdom. The reason that people harm other people, the reason that the planet is polluted and people and animals are not doing so well these days is that individuals don't know or trust or love themselves enough. The technique of sitting meditation called *shamatha-vipashyana* ("tranquility-insight") is like a golden key that helps us to know ourselves.

In shamatha-vipashyana meditation, we sit upright with legs crossed and eyes open, hands resting on our thighs. Then we simply become aware of our breath as it goes out. It requires precision to be right there with that breath. On the other hand, it's extremely relaxed and soft. Saying, "Be right there with the breath as it goes out," is the same thing as saying, "Be fully present." Be right here with whatever is going on. Being aware of the breath as it goes out, we may also be aware of other things going on—sounds on the street,

PHOTO BY LIZA MATTHEWS

the light on the walls. These things capture our attention slightly, but they don't need to draw us off. We can continue to sit right here, aware of the breath going out.

But being with the breath is only part of the technique. These thoughts that run through our minds continually are the other part. We sit here talking to ourselves. The instruction is that when you realize you've been thinking you label it "thinking." When your mind wanders off, you say to yourself, "thinking." Whether your thoughts are violent or passionate or full of ignorance and denial; whether your thoughts are worried or fearful; whether your thoughts are spiritual thoughts, pleasing thoughts of how well you're doing, comforting thoughts, uplifting thoughts, whatever they are—without judgment or harshness simply label it all "thinking," and do that with honesty and gentleness.

The touch on the breath is light: only about 25 percent of the awareness is on the breath. You're not grasping and fixating on it. You're opening, letting the breath mix with the space of the room, letting your breath just go out into space. Then there's something like a pause, a gap until the next breath goes out again. While you're breathing in, there could be some sense of just opening and waiting. It is like pushing the doorbell and waiting for someone to answer. Then you push the doorbell again and wait for someone to answer. Then probably your mind wanders off and you realize you're thinking again—at this point use the labeling technique.

It's important to be faithful to the technique. If you find that your labeling has a harsh, negative tone to it, as if you were saying, "Dammit!" that you're giving yourself a hard time, say it again and lighten up. It's not like trying to shoot down the thoughts as if they were clay pigeons. Instead, be gentle. Use the labeling part of the technique as an opportunity to develop softness and compassion for yourself. Anything that comes up is okay in the arena of meditation. The point is, you can see it honestly and make friends with it.

Although it is embarrassing and painful, it is very healing to stop hiding from yourself. It is healing to know all the ways that you're sneaky, all the ways that you hide out, all the ways that you shut down, deny, close off, criticize people, all your weird little ways. You can know all of that with some sense of humor and kindness. By knowing yourself, you're coming to know humanness altogether. We are all up against these things. So when you realize that you're talking to yourself, label it "thinking" and notice your tone of voice. Let it be compassionate and gentle and humorous. Then you'll be changing old stuck patterns that are shared by the whole human race. Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves. ♦

*From Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living by Pema Chödrön,
available from Shambhala Publications.*



How to Make the Most of Your Day— and Your Life

Take time to push the pause button.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE subjects of contemplation is this question: “Since death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?” You know you will die, but you really don’t know how long you have to wake up from the cocoon of your habitual patterns. You don’t know how much time you have left to fulfill the potential of your precious human birth. Given this, what is the most important thing?

Every day of your life, every morning of your life, you could ask yourself, “As I go into this day, what is the most important thing? What is the best use of this day?” At my age, it’s kind of scary when I go to bed at night and I look back at the day, and it seems like it passed in the snap of a finger. That was a whole day? What did I do with it? Did I move

any closer to being more compassionate, loving, and caring—to being fully awake? Is my mind more open? What did I actually do? I feel how little time there is and how important it is how we spend our time.

What is the best use of each day of our lives? In one very short day, each of us could become more sane, more compassionate, more tender, more in touch with the dream-like quality of reality. Or we could bury all these qualities more deeply and get more in touch with solid mind, retreating more into our own cocoon.

Every time a habitual pattern gets strong, every time we feel caught up or on automatic pilot, we could see it as an opportunity to burn up negative karma. Rather than as a problem, we could see it as our karma ripening. But that's hard to do. When we realize that we are hooked, that we're on automatic pilot, what do we do next? That is a central question for the practitioner.

One of the most effective means for working with that moment when we see the gathering storm of our habitual tendencies is the practice of pausing, or creating a gap. We can stop and take three conscious breaths, and the world has a chance to open up to us in that gap. We can allow space into our state of mind.

Before I talk more about consciously pausing or creating a gap, it might be helpful to appreciate the gap that already exists in our environment. Awakened mind exists in our surroundings—in the air and the wind, in the sea, in the land, in the animals—but how often are we actually touching in with it? Are we poking our heads out of our cocoons long enough to actually taste it, experience it, let it shift something in us, let it penetrate our conventional way of looking at things?

For all of us, the experience of our entanglement differs from day to day. Nevertheless, if you connect with the blessings of your surroundings—the stillness, the magic, and the power—maybe that feeling can stay with you and you can go into your day with it. Whatever it is you are doing, the magic, the sacredness, the expansiveness, the stillness, stays with you. When you are in touch with that larger environment, it can cut through your cocoon mentality.

The great fourteenth-century Tibetan teacher Longchenpa talked about our useless and meaningless focus on the details, getting so caught up we don't see what is in front of our nose. He said that this useless focus extends moment by moment into a continuum, and days, months, and even whole lives go by. Do you spend your whole time just thinking about things, distracting yourself with your own mind, completely lost in thought? I know this habit so well myself. It is the human predicament. It is what the Buddha recognized and what all the living teachers since then have recognized. This is what we are up against.

Pause practice can transform each day of your life. It creates an open doorway to the

sacredness of the place in which you find yourself. The vastness, stillness, and magic of the place will dawn upon you, if you let your mind relax and drop for just a few breaths the storyline you are working so hard to maintain. If you pause just long enough, you can reconnect with exactly where you are, with the immediacy of your experience.

When you are waking up in the morning and you aren't even out of bed yet, even if you are running late, you could just look out and drop the storyline and take three conscious breaths. Just be where you are! When you are washing up, or making your coffee or tea, or brushing your teeth, just create a gap in your discursive mind. Take three conscious breaths. Just pause. Let it be a contrast to being all caught up. Let it be like popping a bubble. Let it be just a moment in time, and then go on.

In any moment you could just listen. In any moment, you could put your full attention on the immediacy of your experience.

When you are completely wound up about something and you pause, your natural intelligence clicks in and you have a sense of the right thing to do. This is part of the magic: our own natural intelligence is always there to inform us, as long as we allow a gap. As long as we are on automatic pilot, dictated to by our minds and our emotions, there is no intelligence. It is a rat race. Whether we are at a retreat center or on Wall Street, it becomes the busiest, most entangled place in the world.

So, what is the most important thing to do with each day? With each morning, each afternoon, each evening? It is to leave a gap. It doesn't matter whether you are practicing meditation or working, there is an underlying continuity. These gaps, these punctuations, are like poking holes in the clouds, poking holes in the cocoon. And these gaps can extend so that they can permeate your entire life, so that the continuity is no longer the continuity of discursive thought but rather one continual gap. ♦

A longer version of this teaching was published in the September 2008 issue of the Shambhala Sun (now Lion's Roar).





How to Develop Unconditional Compassion

A commentary on the great Indian yogi Atisha's famed mind-training slogans.

When I first read the *lojong*, or mind training, teachings in *The Great Path of Awakening* by the nineteenth-century Tibetan teacher Jamgön Kongtrül the Great, I was struck by their unusual message that we can use our difficulties and problems to awaken our hearts. Rather than seeing the unwanted aspects of life as obstacles, Jamgön Kongtrül presented them as the raw material necessary for awakening genuine uncontrived compassion. It is unconditional compassion for ourselves that leads naturally to unconditional compassion

for others. The lojong teachings are organized around seven points that contain fifty-nine pithy slogans that remind us how to awaken our hearts. Here are ten of those slogans.

First, train in the preliminaries.

The preliminaries are also known as the four reminders. In your daily life, try to:

- 1) Maintain an awareness of the preciousness of human life.
- 2) Be aware of the reality that life ends; death comes for everyone.
- 3) Recall that whatever you do, whether virtuous or not, has a result; what goes around comes around.
- 4) Contemplate that as long as you are too focused on self-importance and too caught up in thinking about how you are good or bad, you will suffer. Obsessing about getting what you want and avoiding what you don't want does not result in happiness.

Regard all dharmas as dreams.

Whatever you experience in your life—pain, pleasure, heat, cold, or anything else—is like something happening in a dream. Although you might think things are very solid, they are like passing memory. Nothing solid is really happening.

Drive all blames into one.

This is advice on how to work with your fellow beings. Everyone is looking for someone to blame and therefore aggression and neurosis keep expanding. Instead, pause and look at what's happening with *you*. When you hold on so tightly to your view of what *they* did, you get hooked. Your own self-righteousness causes you to get all worked up and to suffer. So work on cooling that reactivity rather than escalating it. This approach reduces suffering—yours and everyone else's.

Be grateful to everyone.

Others will always show you exactly where you are stuck. They say or do something and you automatically get hooked into a familiar way of reacting—shutting down, speeding up, or getting all worked up. When you react in the habitual way, with anger, greed, and so forth, it gives you a chance to see your patterns and work with them honestly and compassionately. Without others provoking you, you remain ignorant of your painful habits and cannot train in transforming them into the path of awakening.

Always maintain only a joyful mind.

Constantly apply cheerfulness, if for no other reason than because you are on this spiritual path. Have a sense of gratitude to everything, even difficult emotions, because of their potential to wake you up.



Abandon any hope of fruition.

The key instruction is to stay in the present. Don't get caught up in hopes of what you'll achieve and how good your situation will be some day in the future. What you do right now is what matters.

Don't malign others.

You speak badly of others, thinking it will make you feel superior. This only sows seeds of meanness in your heart, causing others not to trust you and causing you to suffer.

Don't act with a twist.

Acting with a twist means having an ulterior motive of benefiting yourself. It's the sneaky approach.

All activities should be done with one intention.

Whatever you are doing, take the attitude of wanting it directly or indirectly to benefit others. Take the attitude of wanting it to increase your experience of kinship with your fellow beings.

Train in the three difficulties.

The three difficulties (or, the three difficult practices) are:

- 1) to recognize your neurosis as neurosis;
- 2) then *not* to do the habitual thing, but to do something different to interrupt the neurotic habit; and
- 3) to make this practice a way of life. ♦



Signs of Spiritual Progress

Progress is not about perfection or success.

IT IS TEMPTING to ask ourselves whether we are making “progress” on the spiritual path. But to look for progress is a setup—a guarantee that we won’t measure up to some arbitrary goal we’ve established.

Traditional teachings tell us that one sign of progress in meditation practice is that our *kleshas* diminish. Kleshas are the strong conflicting emotions that spin off and heighten when we get caught by aversion and attraction.

Though the teachings point us in the direction of diminishing our klesha activity, calling ourselves “bad” because we have strong conflicting emotions is not helpful. That just causes negativity and suffering to escalate. What helps is to train again and again in not acting out our kleshas with speech and actions, and also in not repressing them or getting caught in guilt.

Progress isn’t what we think it is. We are talking about a gradual learning process. By looking deeply and compassionately at how we are affecting ourselves and others with our speech and actions, very slowly we can acknowledge what is happening to us—which is

one sign of progress.

We then discover that patterns can change, which is another sign of progress. Having acknowledged what is happening, we may find that we can do something different from what we usually do. On the other hand, we may discover that (as people are always saying to me), “I see what I do, but I can’t stop it.” We might be able to acknowledge our emotions, but we still can’t refrain from yelling at somebody or laying a guilt trip on ourselves. But to acknowledge that we are doing all these things is in itself an enormous step; it is reversing a fundamental, crippling ignorance.

Basically this is instruction on disowning: letting go and relaxing our grasping and fixation. At a fundamental level we can acknowledge hardening; at that point we can train in learning to soften.

Acknowledging what is, with honesty and compassion; continually training in letting thoughts go and in softening when we are hardening—these are steps on the path of awakening. That’s how kleshas begin to diminish. It is how we develop trust in the basic openness and kindness of our being.

However, as I said, if we use diminishing klesha activity as a measure of progress, we are setting ourselves up for failure. As long as we experience strong emotions—even if we also experience peace—we will feel that we have failed. It is far more helpful to have a goal of becoming curious about what increases klesha activity and what diminishes it, because this goal is fluid and includes our so-called failures. As long as our orientation is toward perfection or success, we will never learn about unconditional friendship with ourselves, nor will we find compassion. ♦

A more detailed version was published in the July 2012 issue of the Shambhala Sun (now Lion’s Roar).



How To Enjoy Life

The Lion's Roar Pema Chödrön Collector's Edition features an exclusive interview with Pema, conducted at her home, Gampo Abbey, in Nova Scotia. In this excerpt from that conversation, Pema talks about what it means—and why it's important—to enjoy our lives.

I notice there's a sign in the entrance to Gampo Abbey that says "Enjoy Your Life." We don't usually think of that as a spiritual teaching, but as we noted in a recent issue of *Lion's Roar*, enjoying your life is really a transformative practice. But it's hard for many of us to do.

It's a great sign to have in a Buddhist monastery. Right away, it presents a paradox: Aren't you here to escape all that hedonism? Aren't you here not to seek enjoyment from outer things?

The answer is yes, that is why you're here. So in that case, what does "enjoy your life" mean, if it doesn't mean getting your pleasure and sense of wellbeing from external things, including people and relationships as well as material goods?

You know who said it best? Leonard Cohen. He meditated all those years at Mt. Baldy

Zen Center, often for twelve hours at a time. In an interview, he said his storyline just wore itself out. He got so bored with his dramatic storyline. And then he made the comment, “The less there was of me, the happier I got.”

That’s the answer to how to enjoy your life. It’s to show up and have a sense of curiosity about whatever might appear that day, including it all in your sense of appreciation of this precious human birth, which is so short. I don’t want to call it delight, although it can feel like that. It’s more curiosity. Some people say, I know what’s going to show up today—the same old thing. But it’s never really the same old thing. Even in Groundhog Day, every day was a different experience for Phil, until finally he learned that caring about people was the answer.

This is actually a big point, because the less there is of you, the more you’re interested in and curious about other people. Who you live with and who you rub up against and who you share this world with is a very important part of enjoying your life.

Sartre said, “Hell is other people,” but this is the other view of that. When people irritate you, when they get your goat, when they slander you, whatever it might be, you still have a relationship with them. It’s interesting that of all the billions of people on the earth, they’re the particular ones who came into your world. There’s respect for whatever happens, and this is only really possible if you’re not rejecting whole parts of your experience. ♦