

A Pema Chödrön Primer

From Shambhala Sun magazine & Shambhala Publications



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Cover photo by Andrea Roth

Designed and edited by the staff of the Shambhala Sun magazine (1660 Hollis St., Suite 701, Halifax, NS, B3J 1V7, Canada www.shambhalasun.com) with the support of Shambhala Publications (300 Massachusetts Ave., Boston, MA, 02115, USA www.shambhala.com). All rights reserved.

Introduction

By Liam Lindsay

Before I left Los Angeles two years ago to join the *Shambhala Sun*, I called a Buddhist friend to share my excitement. “Oooooooo!” she exclaimed. “You’re going to see *Pema!*” I said, “Well, I don’t know about that.”

But, as it turns out, I did. Not privately, but in a large room where Ani Pema Chödrön—by any measure, one of the most successful Western Buddhist teachers—gave a public talk several months later. It was my first time in her presence and I found myself deeply moved by her warmth, wisdom, and humor, her downright *realness*.

The insights offered then, and in her books and other teachings, helped me realize I could no longer turn away from painful experiences. I could no longer try to avoid them with masks and dodges, or suppress them with the numbness of shutting down.

“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,” writes Pema in an excerpt from *Taking the Leap* that we have included in this special publication.

Six months before I headed to Halifax, my second marriage also fell apart. The day before I moved out, the *Los Angeles Times* called to tell me that, like hundreds of others at that troubled paper, I had been downsized out of my job as an editor. It was the first time I had gotten the hook in more than thirty years of journalism that had taken me from Canada to a decade in America, first on the *New York Times* national desk and then on the foreign and national desks in L.A.

The spiritual crisis that had been gripping me—the realization that I was just going through the motions and had to change my life into something that had meaning for me—was suddenly manifesting in a very real, double-barreled way, and it hurt like hell. There was nowhere left to hide. Actually, there was nowhere left even to stand.

I had considered Buddhism my core since 1977, when a friend in Vancouver introduced me to the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and I took vows with the Sixteenth Karmapa, the embodiment of the Tibetan Kagyu lineage. Buddhism was a source of joy, a secret thread in the tapestry of my being. But somehow I perceived it as separate from my



everyday life, which was pretty much a whirlwind of fear-based confusion kept at bay by my well-developed armor and self-affirming reclusiveness.

That all changed in the blink of an eye. No exit, as Pema likes to say, while reminding us to practice loving-kindness—however uncomfortable it feels— toward ourselves and others as we learn to embrace emotions like pain and fear, and to work with them.

So I can say without hesitation that when you feel you can't shake the suffering and have nowhere left to turn, it is an ideal time to turn to Pema.

In cooperation with Shambhala Publications, we offer this “Pema Chödrön Primer”— selections that include key book excerpts and other teachings from the pages of the *Shambhala Sun* as well as discussions with her teacher Dzigar Kongtrül Rinpoche and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker.

We invite you to join us in greeting fear with a smile as we take this quick tour through the healing wisdom of Pema Chödrön. ♦



*Pema and friends
next to the No Exit
sign on the road to
Gampo Abbey.*

Becoming Pema

Shambhala Sun associate editor Andrea Miller on the life and spiritual journey of one Deirdre Blomfield-Brown.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN WAS BORN Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in New York City in 1936. She has said that she had a pleasant childhood with her Catholic family, but that her spiritual life didn't begin until she attended boarding school, where her intellectual curiosity was cultivated.

At age twenty-one, Pema got married. Over the next few years, the couple had two children, and the young family moved to California. She began studying at the University of California at Berkeley, graduating with a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's in elementary education.



Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in Berkeley in the mid-1960s.

In her mid-twenties, Pema's marriage dissolved and she remarried. Then, eight years later, that relationship also fell apart. "When my husband told me he was having an affair and wanted a divorce," she said in an interview with Bill Moyers, "that was a big groundless moment. Reality as we knew it wasn't holding together."



With her children, Edward and Arlyn Bull, in Sonoma, California 1967.

In an effort to cope with her loss, she explored different therapies and spiritual traditions, but nothing helped. Then she read an article by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that suggested working with emotions rather than trying to get rid of them, and this struck a chord. She has said, however, that at the time she didn't know anything about Buddhism, and wasn't aware that the article was even written by a Buddhist.

Continuing her exploration, Pema met Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Chime Rinpoche and had what she has described as a "strong recognition experience." He agreed to her request to study with him in London, and for the next several years she divided her time between the United States and England. When in the U.S., she lived at Chögyam Trungpa's center in San Francisco, where she followed Chime Rinpoche's advice to study with Trungpa Rinpoche.

She and Chögyam Trungpa had a profound connection, and he became her root guru. He had the ability, she has said, to show her how she was stuck in habitual patterns.

Trungpa Rinpoche supported Pema when she decided not to remarry or to get involved in another relationship. "My real appetite and my real passion was for wanting to go deeper," she told Lenore Friedman in *Meetings With Remarkable Women*. "I felt that I was somehow thick, and that in order to really connect... with things as they really are... I needed to put all my energy into it, totally." For Pema, this meant, in 1974, ordaining as a novice nun under the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, head of the Tibetan Kagyu lineage.

As full ordination is denied to women in the Tibetan tradition, Pema didn't think she would ever take the full *bhikshuni* vows that would make her a fully ordained nun. But in 1977, the Karmapa encouraged her to seek out someone who was authorized and willing to perform the ceremony. This search took several years and finally brought her to Hong Kong, where in July 1981 she became the first American in the Vajrayana tradition to undergo *bhikshuni* ordination.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARLYN BULL



The next big step in Pema Chödrön's life was to help Trungpa Rinpoche establish Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia. The Abbey, completed in 1985, was the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in North America for Western men and women, and she took on its directorship.

Pema's first book, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, was published in 1991, followed by *Start Where You Are* in 1994, and *When Things Fall Apart* in 1997. Readers were moved by her earthy, insightful teachings, and her retreats were suddenly full to overflowing. She was now constantly being asked to give talks and to take part in media events.

Meanwhile, in 1994 she was diagnosed with chronic-fatigue syndrome and environmental illness—sicknesses she was still struggling with when she met Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, a young Tibetan Buddhist teacher. "There was this longing that I had since Trungpa Rinpoche died—to have someone to ask my questions of," Pema said in an interview in *Crucial Point*. Today, Kongtrul Rinpoche is Pema's teacher and she devotes herself to his rigorous training methods. She is also an *acharya* (senior teacher) in the Shambhala community, and resident teacher at Gampo Abbey.

In a 2006 interview with the *Shambhala Sun*, Pema explained that she had learned from Kongtrul Rinpoche that everything we seek was like shifting, impermanent clouds, yet behind that the mind was workable. "The underlying state of openness of mind has never gone away. It has never been marred by all the ugliness and craziness we're seeing." ♦

From the Shambhala Sun, November 2009



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 in this excerpt from Taking the Leap, 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 accommodations.

PHOTOS BY BEN HEINE

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, which is available from Shambhala Publications. A more extensive excerpt was published in the November 2009 issue of the Shambhala Sun.





Why Meditation Is Vital

*Although it is embarrassing and painful,
it is very healing to stop hiding from yourself.*

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

PHOTO BY LIZA MATTHEWS

breath as it goes out, we may also be aware of other things going on—sounds on the street, 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.

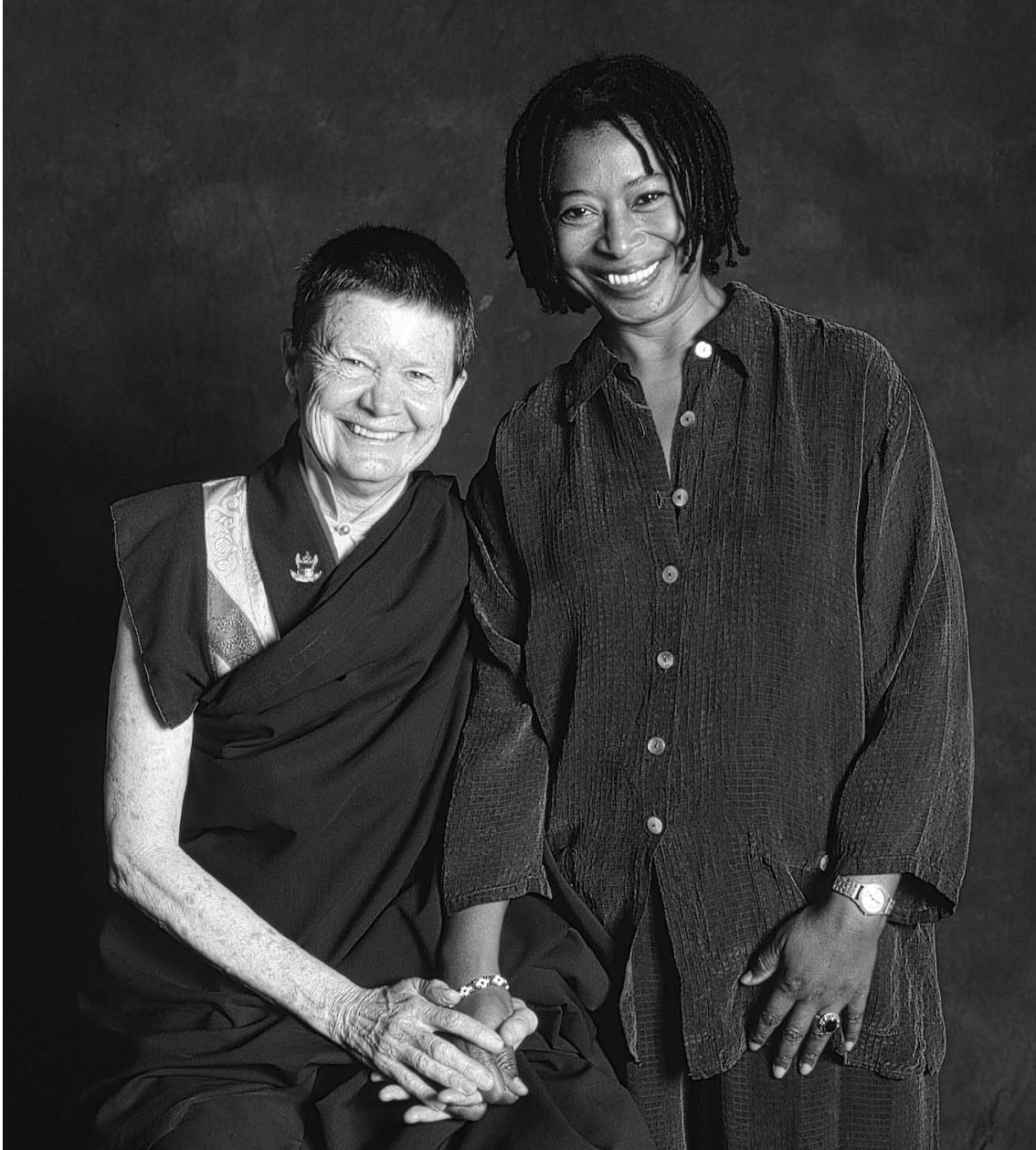
But being with the breath is only part of the technique. These thoughts that run through our minds continually are the other part. We sit here talking to ourselves. The instruction is that when you realize you've been thinking you label it "thinking." When your mind wanders off, you say to yourself, "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,
which is available from Shambhala Publications.*



In Conversation: Pema Chödrön and Alice Walker

From a discussion at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts Theater in 1998.

ALICE WALKER: About four years ago I was having a very difficult time. I had lost someone I loved deeply and nothing seemed to help. Then a friend sent me a tape set by Pema Chödrön called "Awakening Compassion." I stayed in the country and I listened to you, Pema, every night for the next year. I studied *lojong* mind training and I practiced *tonglen*. It was *tonglen*, the practice of taking in people's pain and sending out whatever you have that is positive, that helped me through this difficult passage. I want to thank you so much, and to ask you a question. In my experience suffering is perennial; there is always suffer-

PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE ALICINO

ing. But does suffering really have a use? I used to think there was no use to it, but now I think that there is.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Is there any use in suffering? I think the reason I am so taken by these teachings is that they are based on using suffering as good medicine, like the Buddhist metaphor of using poison as medicine. It's as if there's a moment of suffering that occurs over and over and over again in every human life. What usually happens in that moment is that it hardens us; it hardens the heart because we don't want any more pain. But the lojong teachings say we can take that very moment and flip it. The very thing that causes us to harden and our suffering to intensify can soften us and make us more decent and kinder people.

ALICE WALKER: I was surprised how the heart literally responds to this practice. You can feel it responding physically. As you breathe in what is difficult to bear, there is initial resistance, which is the fear, the constriction. That's the time when you really have to be brave. But if you keep going and doing the practice, the heart actually relaxes. That is quite amazing to feel.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: When we start out on a spiritual path we often have ideals we think we're supposed to live up to. We feel we're supposed to be better than we are in some way. But with this practice you take yourself completely as you are. Then, ironically, taking in pain—breathing it in for yourself and all others in the same boat as you are—heightens your awareness of exactly where you're stuck. Instead of feeling you need some magic makeover so you can suddenly become some great person, there's much more emotional honesty about where you're stuck.

ALICE WALKER: I remember the day I really got it that we're not connected as human beings because of our perfection, but because of our flaws. That was such a relief.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Rumi wrote a poem called "Night Travelers," It's about how all the darkness of human beings is a shared thing from the beginning of time, and how understanding that opens up your heart and opens up your world. You begin to think bigger. Rather than depressing you, it makes you feel part of the whole.

ALICE WALKER: I like what you say about understanding that the darkness represents our wealth, because that's true. There's so much fixation on the light, as if the darkness can be dispensed with, but of course it cannot. After all, there is night, there is Earth; so this is a wonderful acknowledgment of richness.

I think the Jamaicans are right when they call each other “fellow sufferer,” because that’s how it feels. We aren’t angels, we aren’t saints, we’re all down here doing the best we can. We’re trying to be good people, but we do get really mad. You talk in your tapes about when you discovered that your former husband was seeing someone else, and you threw a rock at him. This was very helpful [laughter]. It was really good to have a humorous, earthy, real person as a teacher. This was great.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: When that marriage broke up, I don’t know why it devastated me so much but it was really a kind of annihilation. It was the beginning of my spiritual path, definitely, because I was looking for answers. I was in the lowest point in my life and I read this article by Trungpa Rinpoche called “Working With Negativity.” I was scared by my anger and looking for answers to it. I kept having all these fantasies of destroying my ex-husband and they were hard to shake. There was an enormous feeling of groundlessness and fear that came from not being able to entertain myself out of the pain. The usual exits, the usual ways of distracting myself—nothing was working.

ALICE WALKER: Nothing worked.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: And Trungpa Rinpoche basically said that there’s nothing wrong with negativity *per se*. He said there’s a lot you can learn from it, that it’s a very strong creative energy. He said the real problem is what he called negative negativity, which is when you don’t just stay with negativity but spin off into all the endless cycle of things you can say to yourself about it.



ALICE WALKER: Oh, I think it’s just the right medicine for today. You know, the other really joyous thing is that I feel more open; I feel more openness toward people in my world. It’s what you have said about feeling more at home in your world. I think this is the result of going the distance in your own heart—really being disciplined about opening your heart as much as you can. The thing I find, Pema, is that it closes up again. You know?

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Oh no! [laughter] One year of listening to me and your heart still closes up?

ALICE WALKER: It’s frustrating at times because you think to yourself, I’ve worked on this, why is it still snagging in the same spot?

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: That's how life keeps us honest. The inspiration that comes from feeling the openness seems so important, but on the other hand, I'm sure it would eventually turn into some kind of spiritual pride or arrogance. So life has this miraculous ability to smack you in the face with a real humdinger just when you're going over the edge in terms of thinking you've accomplished something. That humbles you; it's some kind of natural balancing that keeps you human. At the same time the sense of joy does get stronger and stronger.

ALICE WALKER: Because otherwise you feel you're just going to be smacked endlessly, and what's the point? [laughter]]

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: It's about relaxing with the moment, whether it's painful or pleasurable. I teach about that a lot because that's personally how I experience it. The openness brings the smile on my face, the sense of gladness just to be here. And when it gets painful, it's not like there's been some big mistake or something. It just comes and goes.

ALICE WALKER: That brings me to something else I've discovered in my practice, because I've been doing meditation for many years—not tonglen, but TM and *metta* practice. There are times when I meditate, really meditate, very on the dot, for a year or so, and then I'll stop. So what happens? Does that ever happen to you?

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Yes. [laughter]]

ALICE WALKER: Good!

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: And I just don't worry about it.

ALICE WALKER: Good! [laughter]

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: One of the things I've discovered as the years go on is that there can't be any "shoulds." Even meditation practice can become something you feel you should do, and then it becomes another thing you worry about. So I just let it ebb and flow, because I feel it's always with you in some way, whether you're formally practicing or not. ♦



A longer version of this discussion was published in the January 1999 issue of the Shambhala Sun.



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

*Take time to push the pause button. Adapted for a lay audience
from a talk to monastics at Gampo Abbey.*

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 was published in the September 2008 issue of the Shambhala Sun.





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. ♦

From The Compassion Box by Pema Chödrön, which is available from Shambhala Publications.

In Conversation: Pema Chödrön and Dzigar Kongtrül

A student and her teacher on the urgent need for altruism in the West.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: In *The Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryavatara)*, Shantideva points out again and again how we have the intention to be happy and yet we do things that make us suffer. He gives specific advice on how to turn that situation around so that our actions accord with our intention. He was speaking to monks in eighth-century India, and yet what he has to say is completely relevant to anybody now. All these centuries later, we have the same neuroses that they had.



DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: I agree. The text is as valuable for students today as it was for students then. Cultures have changed outwardly, but the makeup of individuals' minds and the confusions and conflicting emotions are the same. The only change may be that there is a more urgent need to relate with one's mind, because pain is so much stronger in this culture, which is so fast-moving and consumed by materialism.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: You think the pain is greater today in our culture?

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: The psychological pain and emotional pain are greater, given that so many of the support systems for people—good morals, ethics, values, and a healthy lifestyle—have been removed.

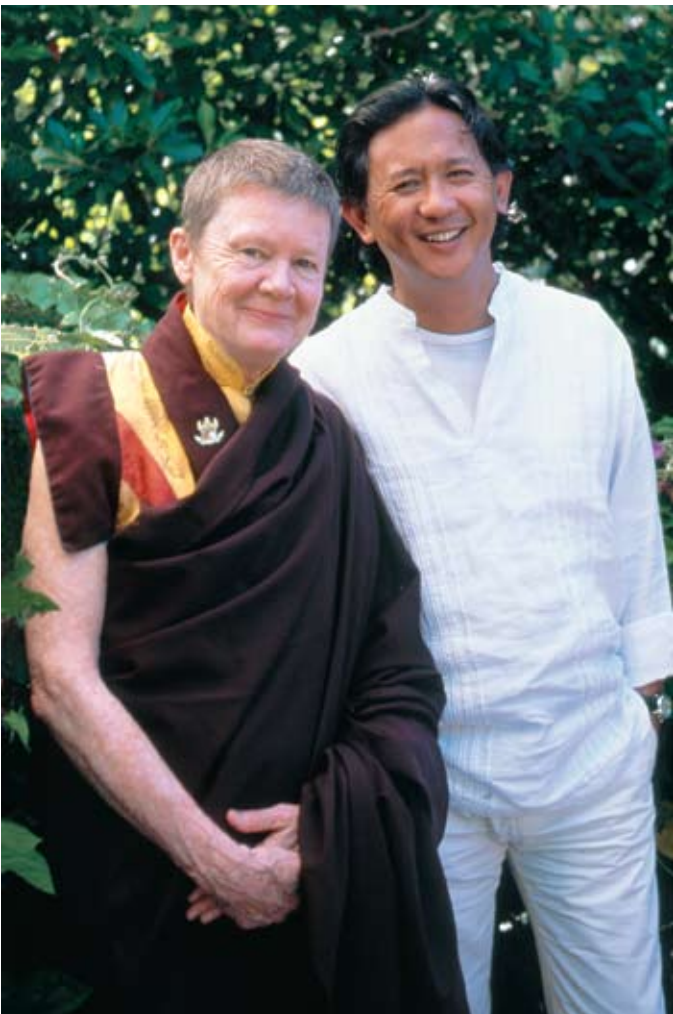
PEMA CHÖDRÖN: What always strikes me is how intelligent we are as human beings, and yet how often we miss this very simple truth: we want happiness but the ways we go about trying to get it cause us to suffer. Nevertheless, we keep right on doing it. This kind of stupidity seems to run very deep in human beings.

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: That's why we need to reflect very deeply, with a strong attitude of not giving up. Then a definite impact can be made on the mind. The ability to think more skillfully and the ability to sustain one's mind with a positive attitude are inherent capabilities. But how do you get somebody interested in reflecting deeply enough to discover those inherent capabilities without their getting burned out from the frustrations and disappointments that arise from seeing their own minds? Somehow, students have to gain a greater confidence in their potential than in the confusion that oppresses them. That confidence is buddhanature. We need to encourage a kind of self-esteem in the student—not ego self-esteem, but buddhanature self-esteem.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Is that the same as what Trungpa Rinpoche called “trust in our basic goodness?”

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: Yes, trust in our basic goodness is very important. Teachers must do whatever they can to instill this in their students, and students must do whatever they can to instill it in themselves. Merit plays a very great role here, I feel. Merit refers to gathering causes and conditions that allow you to have a certain level of well-being. The momentum that results from your positive deeds helps to develop psychological and physical well-being, so that you have the environment and resources necessary to subsist in this world of samsara, as well as to go beyond it.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: I recall an analogy you gave recently for gaining merit: you do a job for its own sake instead of for the commission. Even though you may receive the commission, you get the payoff in terms of merit. If you're doing the job just to get the commission, you probably won't get the payoff, because you won't do a very good job. Whereas, if you're doing the job for its own sake, you will probably do it well—and accrue the merit.



DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: Many people do that. They become very good at what they do, and receive lots of compensation as well.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: It is interesting to consider the nature of the self-centeredness that seems to be prevalent in the West. The ego twist in the West isn't that we love ourselves too much. Rather, we tend to have a negative preoccupation with ourselves. Rather than cherishing ourselves, we hate ourselves. So, loving-kindness toward oneself needs to be developed as the basis before you can spread it to other people.

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: The loving-kindness is directed to your mind, not to the self. When you redirect the love and compassion from the self-centered approach, which has never produced good results anyway, to the altruistic approach, you find you have positive feelings in great abundance. Even though these are extended outwardly to others, they don't leave your mind and end up somewhere else. They fill your mind and sustain it.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Shantideva talks about all the ways that we are willing to hurt ourselves, including suicide. He says, if you're willing to hurt yourself that much, it's no wonder you're willing to hurt other people. It seems to me the verses in the *Bodhicaryavatara* that discuss this issue are key for the West, because we're much more into self-degradation than what you call self-cherishing.

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: The use of language in this case is interesting. When we say self-degradation, it sounds like we don't have much self-importance. But in reality if one were not holding tightly to the self, there would be no reason to feel such aversion to it.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN: Yes, I see self-degradation as one of the main ways that self-importance manifests in the West. You are still "full of yourself," but you are full of yourself as a negative thing.

DZIGAR KONGTRÜL: We come to believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. But if you really study, if you really practice, you will find that there's nothing fundamentally wrong. So you need to commit to a course of study and practice, and until you do that, whether one is in the West or anywhere else, there is going to be the feeling that something is fundamentally wrong with you. When you wish to be happy and free from suffering, and yet your mind is not supporting you, it's very easy to resort to thinking that there's something fundamentally wrong with you. ♦

A longer version of this discussion was published in the January 2006 issue of the Shambhala Sun.



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.

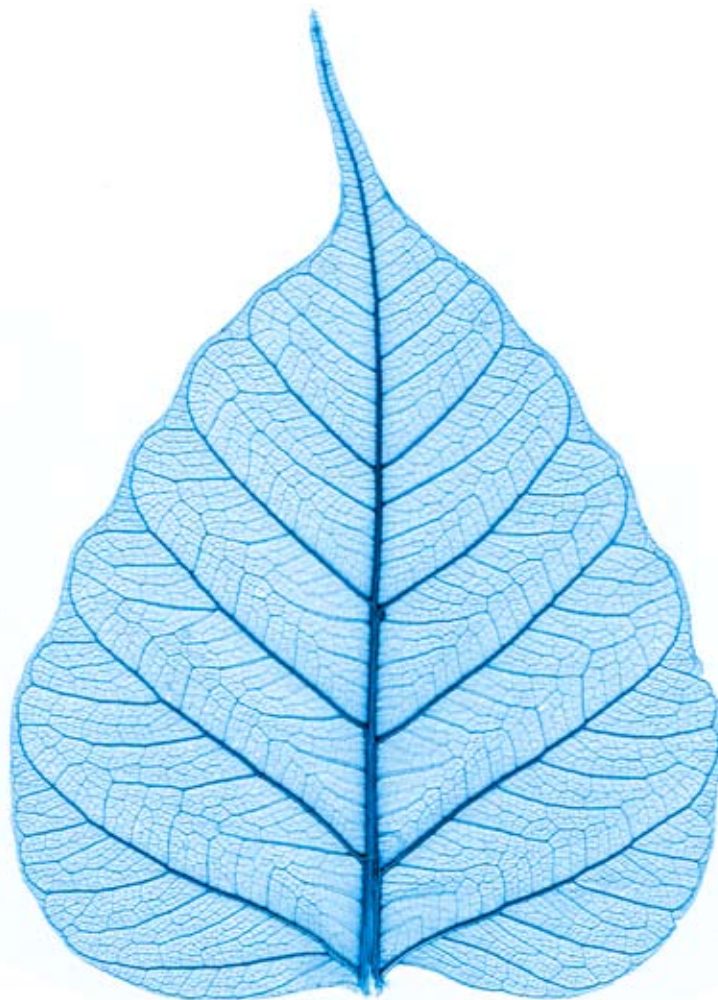
We then discover that patterns can change, which is another sign of progress. Having acknowledged what is happening, we may find that we can do something different from what we usually do. On the other hand, we may discover that (as people are always saying to me), “I see what I do, but I can’t stop 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 March 1999 issue of the Shambhala Sun.



How to Cultivate Peace

Settling the score is often the root of war.

IF WE WANT TO MAKE PEACE, with ourselves and with the world at large, we have to look closely at the source of all of our wars. So often, it seems, we want to “settle the score,” which means getting our revenge, our payback. We want others to feel what we have felt. It means getting even, but it really doesn’t have anything to do with evenness at all. It is, in fact, a highly charged emotional reaction.

Underlying all of these thoughts and emotions is our basic intelligence, our basic wisdom. We all have it and we can all uncover it. It can grow and expand and become more accessible to us as a tool of peacemaking and a tool of happiness for ourselves and for others. But this intelligence is obscured by emotional reactivity when our experience becomes more about us than about them, more about self than about other. That is war.

I have often spoken of *shenpa*, the Tibetan term for the hook in our mind that snags us and prevents us from being open and receptive. When we try to settle the score, we cover

over our innate wisdom, our innate intelligence, with rapidly escalating, highly charged, shenpa-oozing emotionality. We produce one hook after another.

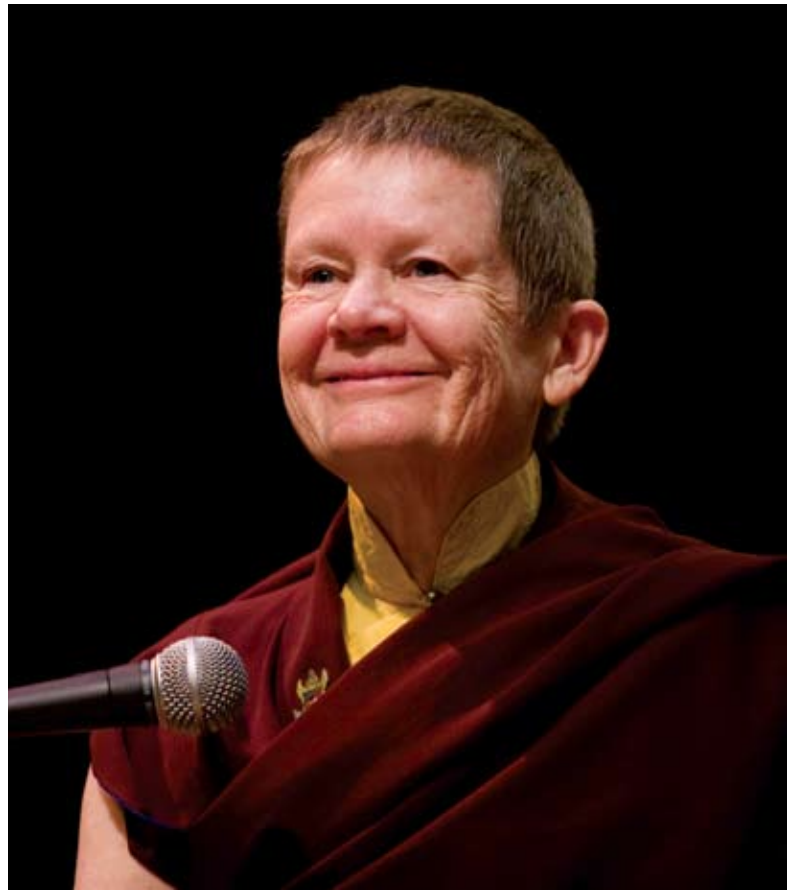
What are we to do about that? We could say that this emotionality is bad and we have to get rid of it. But that brings problems, because it's really the same approach as getting even with other people. In this case we're basically saying that we have to settle the score with ourselves, get even with ourselves, as it were, by ridding ourselves of our emotionality.

Since this approach will not work, what we need to do is to neither reject nor indulge in our own emotional energy, but instead come to know it. Then, as Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught, we can transmute the confusion of emotions into wisdom. In simple terms, we must gain the capacity to slowly, over time, become one with our own energy instead of splitting off. We must learn to use the tools we have available to transform this moment of splitting in two. Splitting in two is the moment when peace turns into war, and it is a very common experience.

Let's say you're having a conversation with someone. You're one with the whole situation. You're open and receptive and there and interested. Then there is a little shenpa pulling-away, a kind of uneasy feeling in the stomach—which we usually don't notice—and then comes our big thought. We are suddenly verbalizing to ourselves, "How am I looking here? Did I just say something stupid? Am I too fat? That was a stupid thing to say, wasn't it, and I am too fat..."

Some thought or other causes us to split off, and before we know it we're completely self-absorbed. We're probably not even hearing the words of the person we're conversing with, because we have retreated into a bubble of self-absorption. That's splitting off. That's dividing in two.

If the path of the peacemaker, of happiness, is being open and receptive and one with your experience, then settling the score is the path of making war, whereby aggression gives birth to aggression and violence gives birth to violence. Nothing is settled. Nothing is made even. But the mind of settling the score does not take that into consideration.



When you are caught by that mind, because of the highly charged and ever-expanding emotionality you're going through, you do not see what settling the score is really doing. You probably don't even see yourself trying to settle the score.

If we started to think about and talk about and make an in-depth exploration of the various wars around the world, we would probably get very churned up. Thinking about wars can indeed get us really worked up. If we did that, we would have plenty of emotional reactivity to work with, because despite all the teachings we may have heard and all the practice we may have done, our knee-jerk reaction is to get highly activated. Before long, we start focusing on those people who caused the whole thing. We get ourselves going and then at some irrational level, we start wanting to settle the score, to get the bad guy and make him pay. But what if we could think of all of those wars and do something that would really cause peace to be the result? Where communication from the heart would be the result? Where the outcome would be more together rather than more split apart?

In a way, that would really be settling the score. That would really be getting even. But settling the score doesn't usually mean that. It means I want my side to win and the other side to lose. They deserve to lose because of what they've done. The side that I want to lose can be an individual in my life or a government. It can be a type or group of people. It can be anything or anyone I point the finger at. I get quite enraged thinking about how they're responsible for everything, so of course I want to settle the score. It's only natural.

We all do this. We bite the hook and escalate the emotional reactivity. We speak out and we act out. The terrorists blow up the bus and then the army comes in to settle the score. It might be better to pause and reflect on how the terrorists got to the place where they were so full of hatred that they wanted to blow up a bus of innocent people. Is the score really settled? Or is the very thing that caused the bus to be blown up in the first place now escalating? Look at this cycle in your own life and in your own experience. See if it is happening: Are you trying to settle the score? ♦

Adapted from the 2007 seminar "Practicing Peace in Times of War."

A longer version was published in the November 2007 issue of the Shambhala Sun.

The book Practicing Peace in Times of War by Pema Chödrön is available from Shambhala Publications.

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