

Buddhist Meditation is Relaxing with the Truth

 lionsroar.com/resting-completely/

by Pema Chödrön | June 9, 2016

It is only when we begin to relax with ourselves as we are, says Pema Chödrön, that meditation becomes a transformative process. The pith instruction is, Stay. . . stay. . . just stay.

As a species, we should never underestimate our low tolerance for discomfort. To be encouraged to stay with our vulnerability is news that we definitely can use. Sitting meditation is our support for learning how to do this. Sitting meditation, also known as mindfulness-awareness practice, is the foundation of *bodhichitta* training. It is the home ground of the warrior bodhisattva.

Sitting meditation cultivates loving-kindness and compassion, the relative qualities of *bodhichitta*, which could be defined as completely awakened heart and mind. It gives us a way to move closer to our thoughts and emotions and to get in touch with our bodies. It is a method of cultivating unconditional friendliness toward ourselves and for parting the curtain of indifference that distances us from the suffering of others. It is our vehicle for learning to be a truly loving person.

Gradually, through meditation, we begin to notice that there are gaps in our internal dialogue. In the midst of continually talking to ourselves, we experience a pause, as if awakening from a dream. We recognize our capacity to relax with the clarity, the space, the open-ended awareness that already exists in our minds. We experience moments of being right here that feel simple, direct, and uncluttered.

This coming back to the immediacy of our experience is training in unconditional *bodhichitta*. By simply staying here, we relax more and more into the open dimension of our being. It feels like stepping out of a fantasy and relaxing with the truth.

Yet there is no guarantee that sitting meditation will be of benefit. We can practice for years without it penetrating our hearts and minds. We can use meditation to reinforce our false beliefs: it will protect us from discomfort; it will fix us; it will fulfill our hopes and remove our fears. This happens because we don't properly understand why we are practicing.

Why *do* we meditate? This is a question we'd be wise to ask. Why would we even bother to spend time alone with ourselves?

First of all, it is helpful to understand that meditation is not just about feeling good. To think that this is why we meditate is to set ourselves up for failure. We'll assume we are doing it wrong almost every time we sit down: even the most settled meditator

experiences psychological and physical pain. Meditation takes us just as we are, with our confusion and our sanity. This complete acceptance of ourselves as we are is called *maitri*, a simple, direct relationship with our being.

Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful. It implies struggle and self-denigration. Denigrating ourselves is probably the major way that we cover over *bodhichitta*.

Does not trying to change mean we have to remain angry and addicted until the day we die? This is a reasonable question. Trying to change ourselves doesn't work in the long run because we're resisting our own energy. Self-improvement can have temporary results, but lasting transformation occurs only when we honor ourselves as the source of wisdom and compassion. We are, as the eighth-century Buddhist master Shantideva pointed out, very much like a blind person who finds a jewel buried in a heap of garbage. It is right here in our smelliest of stuff that we discover the awakened heart of basic clarity and goodness, the completely open mind of *bodhichitta*.

It is only when we begin to relax with ourselves as we are that meditation becomes a transformative process. When we relate with ourselves without moralizing, without harshness, without deception, we finally let go of harmful patterns. Without *maitri*, renunciation of old habits becomes abusive. This is an important point.

There are four main qualities that are cultivated when we meditate: steadfastness, clear seeing, experiencing one's emotional distress, and attention to the present moment. These four factors apply not only to sitting meditation, but are essential to all the *bodhichitta* practices and for relating with difficult situations in our daily lives.

Steadfastness

When we practice meditation we are strengthening our ability to be steadfast with ourselves. No matter what comes up—aching bones, boredom, falling asleep, or the wildest thoughts and emotions—we develop a loyalty to our experience. Although plenty of meditators consider it, we don't run screaming out of the room. Instead we acknowledge that impulse as thinking, without labeling it right or wrong. This no small task. Never underestimate our inclination to bolt when we hurt.

We're encouraged to meditate everyday, even for a short time, in order to cultivate this steadfastness with ourselves. We sit under all kinds of circumstances—whether we are feeling healthy or sick, whether we're in a good mood or depressed, whether we feel our meditation is going well or is completely falling apart. As we continue to sit we see that meditation isn't about getting it right or attaining some ideal state. It's about being able to stay present with ourselves. It becomes increasingly clear that we won't be free of self-destructive patterns unless we develop a compassionate understanding of what they are.

One aspect of steadfastness is simply being in your body. Because meditation emphasizes working with your mind, it's easy to forget that you even have a body.

When you sit down it's important to relax into your body and to get in touch with what is going on. Starting with the top of your head, you can spend a few minutes bringing awareness to every part of your body. When you come to places that are hurting or tense

you can breath in and out three or four times, keeping your awareness on that area. When you get to the soles of your feet you can stop or, if you feel like it, you can repeat this body sweep by going from bottom to top. Then at any time during your meditation period, you can quickly tune back into the overall sense of being in your body. For a moment you can bring your awareness directly back to being right here. You are sitting. There are sounds, smells, sights, aches; you are breathing in and out. You can reconnect with your body like this when it occurs to you—maybe once or twice during a sitting session. Then return to the technique.

[gard group='5']

In meditation we discover our inherent restlessness. Sometimes we get up and leave. Sometimes we sit there but our bodies wiggle and squirm and our minds go far away. This can be so uncomfortable that we feel it's impossible to stay. Yet this feeling can teach us not just about ourselves but also about what it is to be human. All of us derive security and comfort from the imaginary world of memories and fantasies and plans. We really don't want to stay with the nakedness of our present experience. It goes against the grain to stay present. There are the times when only gentleness and a sense of humor can give us the strength to settle down.

The pith instruction is, Stay. . . stay. . . just stay. Learning to stay with ourselves in meditation is like training a dog. If we train a dog by beating it, we'll end up with an obedient but very inflexible and rather terrified dog. The dog may obey when we say, "Stay!" "Come!" "Roll over!" and "Sit up!" but he will also be neurotic and confused. By contrast, training with kindness results in someone who is flexible and confident, who doesn't become upset when situations are unpredictable and insecure.

So whenever we wander off, we gently encourage ourselves to "stay" and settle down. Are we experiencing restlessness? Stay! Discursive mind? Stay! Are fear and loathing out of control? Stay! Aching knees and throbbing back? Stay! What's for lunch? Stay! What am I doing here? Stay! I can't stand this another minute! Stay! That is how to cultivate steadfastness.

Clear Seeing

After we've been meditating for a while, it's common to feel that we are regressing rather than waking up. "Until I started meditating, I was quite settled; now it feels like I'm always restless." "I never used to feel anger; now it comes up all the time." We might complain that meditation is ruining our life, but in fact such experiences are a sign that we're starting to see more clearly. Through the process of practicing the technique day in and out, year after year, we begin to be very honest with ourselves. Clear seeing is another way of saying that we have less self-deception.

The Beat poet Jack Kerouac, feeling primed for a spiritual breakthrough, wrote to a friend before he retreated into the wilderness, "If I don't get a vision on Desolation Peak, then my name ain't William Blake." But later he wrote that he found it hard to face the naked truth. "I'd thought, in June when I get to the top-and everybody leaves-I will come face to face

with God or Tathagata (Buddha) and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering-but instead I'd come face to face with myself, no liquor, no drugs, no chance of faking it, but face to face with ole Hateful . . . Me."

Meditation requires patience and *maitri*. If this process of clear seeing isn't based on self-compassion it will become a process of self-aggression. We need self-compassion to stabilize our minds. We need it to work with our emotions. We need it in order to stay.

When we learn to meditate, we are instructed to sit in a certain position on a cushion or chair. We're instructed to just be in the present moment, aware of our breath as it goes out. We're instructed that when our mind has wandered off, without any harshness or judgmental quality, we should acknowledge that as "thinking" and return to the outbreath. We train in coming back to this moment of being here. In the process of doing this, our fogginess, our bewilderment, our ignorance begin to transform into clear seeing. "Thinking" becomes a code word for seeing "just what is"—both our clarity and our confusion. We are not trying to get rid of thoughts. Rather we are clearly seeing our defense mechanisms, our negative beliefs about ourselves, our desires and our expectations. We also see our kindness, our bravery, our wisdom.

Through the process of practicing the mindfulness-awareness technique on a regular basis, we can no longer hide from ourselves. We clearly see the barriers we set up to shield us from naked experience. Although we still associate the walls we've erected with safety and comfort, we also begin to feel them as a restriction. This claustrophobic situation is important for a warrior. It marks the beginning of longing for an alternative to our small, familiar world. We begin to look for ventilation. We want to dissolve the barriers between ourselves and others.

Experiencing our Emotional Distress

Many people, including long-time practitioners, use meditation as a means of escaping difficult emotions. It is possible to misuse the label "thinking" as a way of pushing negativity away. No matter how many times we've been instructed to stay open to whatever arises, we still can use meditation as repression. Transformation occurs only when we remember, breath by breath, year after year, to move toward our emotional distress without condemning or justifying our experience.

Trungpa Rinpoche describes emotion as a combination of self-existing energy and thoughts. Emotion can't proliferate without our internal conversations. If we're angry when we sit to meditate, we are instructed to label the thoughts "thinking" and let them go. Yet below the thoughts something remains—a vital, pulsating energy. There is nothing wrong, nothing harmful about that underlying energy. Our practice is to stay with it, to experience it, to leave it as it is, without proliferating.

There are certain advanced techniques in which you intentionally churn up emotions by thinking of people or situations that make you angry or lustful or afraid. The practice is to let the thoughts go and connect directly with the energy, asking yourself, "Who am I without these thoughts?" What we do with mindfulness-awareness practice is simpler than that, but I consider it equally daring. When emotional distress arises uninvited, we let

the story line go and abide with the energy of that moment. This is a felt experience, not a verbal commentary on what is happening. We can feel the energy in our bodies. If we can stay with it, neither acting it out nor repressing it, it wakes us up. People often say, "I fall asleep all the time in meditation. What shall I do?" There are lots of antidotes to drowsiness but my favorite is, "Get angry!"

Not abiding with our energy is a predictable human habit. Acting out and repressing are tactics we use to get away from our emotional pain. For instance most of us when we're angry scream or act it out. We alternate expressions of rage with feeling ashamed of ourselves and wallowing in it. We become so stuck in repetitive behavior that we become experts at getting all worked up. In this way we continue to strengthen our conflicting emotions.

One night years ago I came upon my boyfriend passionately embracing another woman. We were in the house of a millionaire who had a priceless collection of pottery. I was furious and looking for something to throw. Everything I picked up I had to put back down because it was worth at least \$10,000. I was completely enraged and I couldn't find an outlet! There were no exits from experiencing my own energy. The absurdity of the situation totally cut through my rage. I went outside and looked at the sky and laughed until I cried.

In Vajrayana Buddhism it is said that wisdom is inherent in emotions. When we struggle against our own energy we are rejecting the source of wisdom. Anger without the fixation is none other than mirrorlike wisdom. Pride and envy without fixation is experienced as equanimity. The energy of passion when it's free of grasping is discriminating awareness wisdom.

In bodhichitta training we also welcome the living energy of emotions. When our emotions intensify what we usually feel is fear. This fear is always lurking in our lives. In sitting meditation we practice dropping whatever story we are telling ourselves and leaning into the emotions and the fear. Thus we train in opening the fearful heart to the restlessness of our own energy. We learn to abide with the experience of our emotional distress.

Attention to the Present Moment

Another factor we cultivate in the transformative process of meditation is attention to this very moment. We make the choice, moment by moment, to be fully here. Attending to our present-moment mind and body is a way of being tender toward self, toward other, and toward the world. This quality of attention is inherent in our ability to love.

Coming back to the present moment takes some effort but the effort is very light. The instruction is to "touch and go." We touch thoughts by acknowledging them as thinking and then we let them go. It's a way of relaxing our struggle, like touching a bubble with a feather. It's a nonaggressive approach to being here.

Sometimes we find that we like our thoughts so much that we don't want to let them go. Watching our personal video is a lot more entertaining than bringing our mind back home. There's no doubt that our fantasy world can be very juicy and seductive. So we train in

using a “soft” effort, in interrupting our habitual patterns; we train in cultivating self-compassion.

We practice meditation to connect with *maitri* and unconditional openness. By not deliberately blocking anything, by directly touching our thoughts and then letting them go with an attitude of no big deal, we can discover that our fundamental energy is tender, wholesome and fresh. We can start to train as a warrior, discovering for ourselves that it is bodhichitta, not confusion, that is basic.



About Pema Chödrön

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