

Meditations with Pema Chodron

Rev. Amy Freedman
Channing Memorial Church
August 23, 2009

Reflections before the Service:

“If we learn to open our hearts, anyone, including the people who drive us crazy, can be our teacher.”

“A further sign of health is that we don't become undone by fear and trembling, but we take it as a message that it's time to stop struggling and look directly at what's threatening us.”

—Pema Chodron (1936-)

REFLECTION: *Meditations with Pema Chodron*, Rev. Amy Freedman

This is the fourth in a series of services focusing on great spiritual teachers. We have explored the lives and contemplated with Catholic mystic Hildegard of Bingen, Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Sufi Master Hafiz. Unlike those sages who lived in other times, the woman who inspired today's service is still living. American Buddhist Pema Chodron is a bestselling author of several books including *When Things Fall Apart* and *The Places that Scare You*. She also has a series of audio discs and videos as well as her own website.

I first encountered Pema Chodron while I was in seminary in Berkeley, CA. As a part of a course in East Asian Religions, we visited the local Tibetan Buddhist Monastery. When our class entered the Great Meditation Hall, a few Buddhist Nuns happened to be leaving. A classmate whispered enthusiastically, “That was Pema Chodron!” then there was an electrifying buzz through our group like catching sight of a Rock Star. At that point, I had never heard of her. She was not remarkable looking. Of course, that is part of the practice of taking the bodhisattva vow. In becoming a monk or nun, you cast aside your personal affects like fashion and jewelry for maroon and saffron robes and even shave your head as a way of shifting focus from your outward appearance. She was a petite woman with reddish hair and an unassuming presence that would have been unmemorable except for the reaction of my colleagues.

Pema Chodron is widely known for her ability to make the principles of Buddhism more accessible to a wider audience. She currently serves as the resident teacher of the Gampo Abbey, a Buddhist monastic center in Nova Scotia. She was born Deidre Blomfield-Brown and raised Catholic in New Jersey. Her Buddhist name Chodron means “Lotus Torch of the Dharma.”

When asked why she became a Buddhist, a question often posed in interviews; first a joyful twinkle appears in her eye, characteristic of a longtime Buddhist practitioner, and then her answer, “I became a Buddhist because I hated my husband.”

Then she tells a story. One day, she was sitting on the front steps of her home in New Mexico drinking a cup of tea and soaking in the beautiful view, when her husband

came around the corner to announce that he was having an affair and wanted a divorce. In her book, *When Things Fall Apart* she writes: “I remember the sky and how huge it was. I remember the sound of the river and the steam rising up from my tea. There was no time, no thought, there was nothing—just the light and a profound, limitless stillness. Then I regrouped and picked up a stone and threw it at him.”

She was a mother of two children. She was an elementary school teacher. This was her second marriage and the sudden revelation of her husband’s infidelity was devastating. More than anger, she felt terror and a sense of groundlessness. At the age of thirty-five she had previously considered herself an easy-going, friendly, warm-hearted person but in that moment everything she thought she knew about the world and herself was shaken. Her grief was profound. None of the usual entertainment helped her feel any better—food, movies, friends, smoking a joint, nothing brought any sense of relief or comfort.

Her turning point came when a friend showed her an article by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche who would later become her teacher. In it he explained there is nothing wrong with Negativity per se. For along with Negativity comes powerful energy and potential creativity that can serve to wake you up to your aliveness. Negativity becomes a problem when we allow this energy to become “Negative Negativity” spinning off to blame other people or ourselves. The key in facing Negativity then is to allow the energy released to be helpful not harmful or aggressive.

The truth that was revealed in the article led Deidre to find a teacher and then to become a Buddhist nun. At the age of 36 she was ordained in the Shambala tradition. Her bodhisattva vows are not only to wake up but to end the suffering of all beings. Our service this morning will continue to explore how to face the negative, scary parts of our lives as a path of spiritual awakening.

RESPONSIVE READING: *Aspiration*, Pema Chodron

Through out our lives, until this very moment, whatever virtue we have accomplished, including any benefit that may come from this service, we dedicate to the welfare of all beings.

May the roots of suffering diminish. May warfare, violence, neglect, indifference, and addictions also decrease.

May the wisdom and compassion of all beings increase, now and in the future.

May we clearly see all the barriers we erect between ourselves and others to be as insubstantial as our dreams.

May we appreciate the perfection of all phenomena. May we continue to open our hearts and minds, in order to work ceaselessly for the benefit of all beings.

May we go to the places that scare us.

May we lead the life of a warrior.

READING Pema Chodron’s Words

Comfortable with Uncertainty (Pema Chodron, 2002), *The Love That Will Not Die*, p. 1

REFLECTION: *The Places that Scare Us*, Rev. Amy Freedman

This Lousy World! Lousy people. Lousy government. Lousy weather. I was too cold now I'm too hot. Lousy church. Lousy pews. The person sitting in front of me is too tall. The person sitting next to me is too fat. It smells in here...Someone is wearing perfume and I am allergic to perfume.

Everyone and everything is lousy. The analogy is that you have bare feet so that moving through this lousy world is like walking on hot sand or shards of glass, it hurts. It's painful.

Ah! I have a brilliant idea. Everywhere I go, I will cover it with leather so it won't hurt me. Or if I can't protect myself by covering it over, then I will get rid of everything that bothers me. I am going to do all that I can to ban perfume in the world. I will get rid of him and her. I am going to control the temperature. Once I succeed, once I finally get rid of everything that bothers me then I will be a very happy person.

Pema Chodron opened one of her talks with a version of this rant against the lousy world to illustrate a point. It's amusing because we recognize ourselves. Even if we do not say it aloud this can be part of our inner dialogue. We know that we cannot control the weather and yet we complain about it. It is impossible to cover the world around us so we are never hurt or irritated. However, we can wrap our bare feet, we can put on shoes. This is how Pema Chodron describes working with our minds. Instead of focusing the source of our discomfort onto other people or external circumstances, we can look inward to that voice still and small within ourselves to cultivate fearlessness and compassion.

In her book, *The Places that Scare You*, Pema Chodron shares a childhood memory that she later recognized as an essential Buddhist teaching. When she was six years old, she felt angry, unloved and lonely. As she was walking down the street kicking everything in her path, an old woman laughed and called out to her, "Little girl, don't you go let life harden your heart!"

Problems and difficulties come our way. No one escapes from the challenges of living. However, Negativity is not bad per se. As Pema Chodron writes, "We can let the circumstances of our lives harden us and make us increasingly resentful and afraid or we can let them soften us and make us kinder."

The Buddha taught that we are all enlightened already. Each one of us has Bodhicitta, an awakened heart. The good news is that despite the pain, suffering, and confusion that we experience, we are never separate from this awakened heart.

One of the metaphors that surprised me through out her writing is that of a Warrior. After all, most Buddhists are pacifists and vegetarians as the first Buddhist precept is not to take life. So, how is it that our responsive affirmation concludes, "May we lead the life of a warrior"?

Much of the suffering that we experience in life comes from our craving for security. It is impossible to escape uncertainty. We cannot protect ourselves from harm, anger and fear no matter how hard we try to cover over painful things or try to eradicate them from our lives. The path of the warrior is to have the courage to expect uncertainty, and to relate to discomfort directly. The path of a warrior is to face our enemies and to stand in the places that scare us.

This is one of those spiritual lessons that I know is true but is never easy. When I was a chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital our group of twelve rotated being on call that Summer. One time, the pager on my nightstand went off in the middle of the night. I called in to learn that a child had died. I rushed to MGH as in a dream my heart pounding with anxiety. Who was I a twenty-five year old first year seminary student to answer this call? Why me? What could I possibly say to this family? If only I had a prayer book like some of my colleagues of other traditions. As I clutched the wheel of my car, wishing I could go home and pull up the covers, the words of Ron Cook, one of my Unitarian professors assured me, “Remember, you are enough”.

The scene in that hospital room was unforgettable. In the single bed lay a pretty young girl, drained of all color and lifeless on crisp white sheets. All around the room were family members of all ages wailing and clinging to one another. I cannot tell you what I said to them. All I can tell you is that we held hands and prayed for peace. The room was not silent or happy but all of our hearts were open to the tender place of Bodhicitta.

Whenever I feel afraid of entering a room, picking up a phone, confronting a critic, challenging someone with whom I disagree, or face something that I know will be painful, I take a deep breath and remind myself “You are enough”. I will not be any stronger, smarter, more loving later. Facing discomfort is never easy but more often than not taking action to repair a relationship, to address an issue, to face the truth, to try a task that I have never done before is not as difficult as how I imagined it. The path of a warrior can liberate me from the scary interior images of what might happen and instead relate directly to reality.

As you know, we are in the midst of a debate about health care reform in this country. The details of the health care plan are as yet unclear. The lack of clarity has led to anxiety and accusations. Rowdy Town Hall meetings and heated talk shows have revealed angry rhetoric and misinformation. Many are worried about a government takeover of our medical system. Some claim that health care would be rationed. Others assert that there would be “death panels” set up to euthanize elderly Americans. During this economic recession, many are concerned that a new health care plan would bankrupt hospitals and increase the deficit.

If you listen to the outraged callers and read letters to the editor, the critiques are two-fold—either they are worried about the financial stability of our nation or afraid that they or their loved ones will no longer have access to the care that they need. Both of those scenarios are “places that scare us”. No one wants the fragile financial system of

the United States to collapse. No one wants to be denied treatment or to stand by as a loved one suffers.

As we know, our medical system is one of the most advanced in the world. It is also one of the most expensive. One in six Americans do not have health insurance and some have to decide between medications and food. When people only go to the hospital in dire need, we all pay the price.

Since 1979, our Unitarian Universalist Association has urged for the “adoption of an insurance system that will be economically equitable for all sections of the population.” Since 2008, our General Assembly of congregations has encouraged “Unitarian Universalists to become informed advocates for universal access to non-profit healthcare so that Americans can have the excellent and affordable health care system we deserve.”

This past week our UU Association sponsored a conference call with President Obama along with other religious leaders in order to help create a positive force for health care reform. I encourage all of us to engage in this lively debate. Not to shout down people with opposing points of view but to acknowledge that this is a highly-charged issue. This is about our health. This about who receives care. This is also about the influence and power of medical professionals and insurance companies.

I encourage all of us to participate in this process of reform. Pay attention to the comments based on fear. Notice your own anxiety and anger. Then use the energy that arises for compassionate inquiry and action.

As people of conscience, may our prayerful intention be the same as the Buddha, “May all beings be at peace and at ease. May they be happy. May they be well. May they be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.”

In the week ahead, may each one of us cultivate compassion and courage. May we stand in the places that scare us. “Every day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves, ‘Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?’ Every day at the moment things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, ‘Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?’” When Things Fall Apart, Pema Chodron (1997), p.11

MEDITATION, Amy

Let us join now in a time of meditation.

Put both feet solidly on the floor.

Place your hands open on your lap.

Feel your head balanced on the supple column of your spine.

If you are comfortable doing so, allow your eyes to close or your gaze to be soft.

Take a deep breath in and let it out with a sigh.

In the week ahead,

may we hold the intention of connecting with Bodhicitta, our awakened heart.

Allowing ourselves to be with uncertainty,

Surrendering our cherished ways of holding it all together,
not trying to cover or eradicate pain but being with what is
and allowing the energy to awaken courage and compassion.
May we be of some benefit to the people we encounter,
in the street, in the store, at work, at home, our family and friends.
May we aspire to be more sane, less hysterical.
As a part of our aspiration to be more sane,
may we find time for compassionate inquiry
through meditation, reading, conversation and action.
So that through our living we become more courageous and compassionate
and more able to benefit all beings.
Let us continue our reflection in silence.