



Photo Michael Wood

WITH Comfortable Uncertainty

“The root of suffering is resisting the certainty that no matter what the circumstances, uncertainty is all we truly have.”

– Pema Chodron

No Such Thing As A True Story

By weaving our opinions, prejudices, strategies, and emotions into a solid reality, we try to make a big deal out of ourselves, out of our pain, out of our problems. But things are not as solid, predictable, or seamless as they seem.

In sitting meditation, our practice is to watch our thoughts arise, label them “thinking,” and return to the breath. If we were trying to find the beginning, middle, and end of each thought, we’d soon discover there is no such thing. Trying to find the moment when one thought becomes another is like trying to find the moment when boiling water turns into steam. Yet we habitually string our thoughts together into a story that tricks us into believing that our identity, our happiness, our pain, and our problems are all solid and separate entities. In fact, like thoughts, all these constructs are constantly changing. Each situation, each thought, each word, each feeling is just a passing memory.

Wisdom is a fluid process, not something concrete that can be added up or measured. The warrior-bodhisattva trains with the attitude that everything is a dream. Life is a dream; death is a dream; waking is a dream; sleeping is a dream. This dream is the direct immediacy of our experience. Trying to hold on to any of it by buying our story line only blocks our wisdom.

The Three Poisons

In the Buddhist teachings the messy emotional stuff is called *klesha*, which means poison. There are three main poisons: passion, aggression, and ignorance. We could talk about these in different ways – for example, we could also call them craving, aversion, and couldn’t care less. Addictions of all kinds come under the category of craving, which is wanting, wanting, wanting – feeling that we have to have some kind of resolution. Aversion encompasses violence, rage, hatred, and negativity of all kinds, as well as garden-variety irritation. And ignorance? Nowadays, it’s usually called denial.

The three poisons are always trapping you in one way or another, imprisoning you and making your world really small. When you feel craving, you could be sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon, but all you can see is this piece of chocolate cake that you’re craving. With aversion, you’re sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and all you can hear are the angry words you said to someone ten years ago. With ignorance, you’re sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon with a paper bag over your head. Each of the three poisons has the power to capture you so completely that you don’t even perceive what’s in front of you.

The pith instruction is, whatever you do, don’t try to make the poisons go away. When you are trying to make them go away, you’re losing your wealth, along with your neurosis. The irony is that what we want most to avoid in our lives is crucial to awakening bodhichitta. These juicy emotional spots are where a warrior gains wisdom and compassion. Of course, we’ll want to get out of those spots far more often than we’ll want to stay. That’s why self-compassion and courage are vital. Without loving-kindness, staying with pain is just warfare.

Six Ways To Be Lonely

Usually we regard loneliness as an enemy. It’s restless and pregnant and hot with the desire to escape and find something or someone to keep us company. When we rest in the middle of it, we begin to have a non-threatening relationship with loneliness that turns our usual fearful patterns upside down. There are six ways of describing this kind of cool loneliness:

- *Less desire* is the willingness to be lonely without resolution when everything in us yearns for something to change our mood.
- *Contentment* means that we no longer believe that escaping our loneliness is going to bring happiness or courage or strength.
- *Avoiding unnecessary activities* means that we stop looking for something to entertain us or to save us.
- *Complete discipline* means that at every opportunity, we’re willing to come back to the present moment with compassionate attention.
- *Not wandering in the world of desire* is about relating directly with how things are, without trying to make them okay.
- *Not seeking security from one’s discursive thoughts* means no longer seeking the companionship of constant conversation with ourselves. ●

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Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun, who is resident teacher at Gampo Abbey, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She is the author of five books, including the best selling *When Things Fall Apart* and *The Places That Scare You*. Her new book, *Comfortable with Uncertainty*, consists of short, stand-alone readings inspired by the Buddhist tradition of the 108-day retreat, and is designed to help readers cultivate compassion and awareness among the challenges of daily living. Highly recommended.

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