

"Pema's deep experience and her fresh way of looking at things are like mountain water—clear and refreshing, as good Dharma should be." —Jack Kornfield

# THE WISDOM OF NO ESCAPE

and the Path of Loving-Kindness



Pema Chödrön

author of *When Things Fall Apart*

SHAMBHALA  
CLASSICS

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SHAMBHALA  
*Boston & London*  
2010

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Shambhala Publications, Inc.  
Horticultural Hall  
300 Massachusetts Avenue  
Boston, Massachusetts 02115  
[www.shambhala.com](http://www.shambhala.com)

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The author's proceeds from this book will be donated to Gampo Abbey, Pleasant Bay, Nova Scotia.

*The Library of Congress catalogues the original edition of this book as follows:*

Chödrön, Pema.

The wisdom of no escape: and the path of loving-kindness/ Pema Chödrön.

p. cm.

eISBN 978-0-8348-2109-5

ISBN 978-0-87773-632-5

ISBN 978-1-57062-872-6

ISBN 978-1-59030-793-9

1. Meditation—Buddhism. I. Title.

BQ5625.C48 1991

294.3'443—dc20 90-53585 CIP

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*To my teacher, Vidyadhara the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche,  
and to my children, Arlyn and Edward*

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## PREFACE

THE TALKS in this book were given during a onemonth practice period (*dathun*) in the spring of 1989. During that month the participants, both lay and monastic, used the meditation technique presented by Chögyam Trungpa that is described in this book. The formal sitting meditation was balanced by walking meditation and eating meditation (*oryoki*) and by maintaining the environment of the monastery and helping to prepare the meals.

Early each morning these talks were presented. They were intended to inspire and encourage the participants to remain wholeheartedly awake to everything that occurred and to use the abundant material of daily life as their primary teacher and guide.

The natural beauty of Gampo Abbey, a Buddhist monastery for Western men and women founded in 1983 by Chögyam Trungpa, was an important element in the talks. The abbey is located on Cap Breton Island, Nova Scotia, at the end of a long dirt road, on cliffs high above the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, where the wildness and playfulness of the weather, the animals, and the landscape permeates the atmosphere. As one sits in the meditation hall, the vastness of the sky and water permeates the mind and heart. The silence of the place, intensified by the sounds of sea and wind, birds and animals, permeates the senses.

During the *dathun* (as always at the abbey), the participants kept the five monastic vows: not to lie, not to steal, not to engage in sexual activity, not to take life, and not to use alcohol or drugs.

The resulting collaboration of nature, solitude, meditation, and vows made an alternately painful and delightful “no exit” situation. With nowhere to hide, one could more easily hear the teaching given in these simple talks in a wholehearted, open-minded way.

The message for the *dathun* as well as for the reader is to be with oneself without embarrassment or harshness. This is instruction on how to love oneself and one’s world. It is therefore simple, accessible instruction on how to alleviate human misery at a personal and global level.

I wish to thank Ane Trime Lhamo; Jonathan Green of Shambhala Publications, who encouraged me to publish a book; Migme Chödrön of Gampo Abbey, who transcribed and edited the talks; and Emile Hilburn Sell of Shambhala Publications, who shaped them into their present form. Whatever is said here is but my very limited understanding, thus far, of what my teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, compassionately and with great patience showed to me.

May it be of benefit.

## *Loving-Kindness*

THERE'S A COMMON misunderstanding among all the human beings who have ever been born on the earth that the best way to live is to try to avoid pain and just try to get comfortable. You can see this even in insects and animals and birds. All of us are the same.

A much more interesting, kind, adventurous, and joyful approach to life is to begin to develop our curiosity, not caring whether the object of our inquisitiveness is bitter or sweet. To lead a life that goes beyond pettiness and prejudice and always wanting to make sure that everything turns out on our own terms, to lead a more passionate, full, and delightful life than that, we must realize that we can endure a lot of pain and pleasure for the sake of finding out who we are and what this world is, how we tick and how our world ticks, how the whole thing just *is*. If we're committed to comfort at any cost, as soon as we come up against the least edge of pain, we're going to run; we'll never know what's beyond that particular barrier or wall or fearful thing.

When people start to meditate or to work with any kind of spiritual discipline, they often think that somehow they're going to improve, which is a sort of subtle aggression against who they really are. It's a bit like saying, "If I jog, I'll be a much better person." "If I could only get a nicer house, I'd be a better person." "If I could meditate and calm down, I'd be a better person." Or the scenario may be that they find fault with others; they might say, "If it weren't for my husband, I'd have a perfect marriage." "If it weren't for the fact that my boss and I can't get on, my job would be just great." And "If it weren't for my mind, my meditation would be excellent."

But loving-kindness—*maitri*—toward ourselves doesn't mean getting rid of anything. *Maitri* means that we can still be crazy after all these years. We can still be angry after all these years. We can still be timid or jealous or full of feelings of unworthiness. The point is not to try to change ourselves. Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we are already. The ground of practice is you or me or whoever we are right now, just as we are. That's the ground, that's what we study, that's what we come to know with tremendous curiosity and interest.

Sometimes among Buddhists the word *ego* is used in a derogatory sense, with a different connotation than the Freudian term. As Buddhists, we might say, "My ego causes me so many problems." Then we might think, "Well, then, we're supposed to get rid of it, right? Then there'd be no problem." On the contrary, the idea isn't to get rid of ego but actually to begin to take an interest in ourselves, to investigate and be inquisitive about ourselves.

The path of meditation and the path of our lives altogether has to do with curiosity, inquisitiveness. The ground is ourselves; we're here to study ourselves and to get to know ourselves now, not later. People often say to me, "I wanted to come and have an interview with you, I wanted to write you a letter, I wanted to call you on the phone, but I wanted to wait until I was more together." And I think, "Well, if you're anything like me, you could wait forever!" So come as you are. The magic is being willing to open to that, being willing to be fully awake to that. One of the main discoveries of meditation is seeing how we continually run away from the present moment, how we avoid being here just as we are. That's not considered to be a problem; the point is to see it.

Inquisitiveness or curiosity involves being gentle, precise, and open—actually being able to let go

and open. Gentleness is a sense of goodheartedness toward ourselves. Precision is being able to see very clearly, not being afraid to see what's really there, just as a scientist is not afraid to look into the microscope. Openness is being able to let go and to open.

The effect of this month of meditation that we are beginning will be as if, at the end of each day someone were to play a video of you back to yourself and you could see it all. You would wince quite often and say "Ugh!" You probably would see that you do all those things for which you criticize all those people you don't like in your life, all those people that you judge. Basically, making friends with yourself is making friends with all those people too, because when you come to have this kind of honesty, gentleness, and goodheartedness, combined with clarity about yourself, there's no obstacle to feeling loving-kindness for others as well.

So the ground of maitri is ourselves. We're here to get to know and study ourselves. The path, the way to do that, our main vehicle, is going to be meditation, and some sense of general wakefulness. Our inquisitiveness will not be limited just to sitting here; as we walk through the halls, use the lavatories, walk outdoors, prepare food in the kitchen, or talk to our friends—whatever we do—we will try to maintain that sense of aliveness, openness, and curiosity about what's happening. Perhaps we will experience what is traditionally described as the fruition of maitri—playfulness.

So hopefully we'll have a good month here, getting to know ourselves and becoming more playful rather than more grim.



## *Satisfaction*

IT'S VERY HELPFUL to realize that being here, sitting in meditation, doing simple everyday things like working, walking outside, talking with people, bathing, using the toilet, and eating, is actually a process that we need to be fully awake, fully alive, fully human. It's also helpful to realize that this body that we have, this very body that's sitting here right now on this shrine room floor, this very body that perhaps aches because it's only day two of the dathun, and this mind that we have at this very moment, are exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, and fully alive. Furthermore, the emotions that we have right now, the negativity and the positivity, are what we actually need. It is just as if we had looked around to find out what would be the greatest wealth that we could possibly possess in order to lead a decent, good, completely fulfilling, energetic, inspired life, and found it all right here.

Being satisfied with what we already have is a magical golden key to being alive in a full, unrestricted, and inspired way. One of the major obstacles to what is traditionally called enlightenment is resentment, feeling cheated, holding a grudge about who you are, where you are, and what you are. This is why we talk so much about making friends with ourselves, because, for some reason or other, we don't feel that kind of satisfaction in a full and complete way. Meditation is a process of lightening up, of trusting the basic goodness of what we have and who we are, and realizing that any wisdom that exists, exists in what we already have. Our wisdom is all mixed up with what we call our neurosis. Our brilliance, our juiciness, our spiciness, is all mixed up with our craziness and our confusion, and therefore it doesn't do any good to try to get rid of our so-called negative aspects, because in that process we also get rid of our basic wonderfulness. We can lead our life so as to become more awake to who we are and what we're doing rather than trying to improve or change or get rid of who we are or what we're doing. The key is to wake up, to become more alert, more inquisitive and curious about ourselves.

While we are sitting in meditation, we are simply exploring humanity and all of creation in the form of ourselves. We can become the world's greatest experts on anger, jealousy, and self-deprecation, as well as on joyfulness, clarity, and insight. Everything that human beings feel, we feel. We can become extremely wise and sensitive to all of humanity and the whole universe simply by knowing ourselves, just as we are.

We're talking about loving-kindness again, in a slightly different way. The ground of loving-kindness is this sense of satisfaction with who we are and what we have. The path is a sense of wonder, becoming a two- or three-year-old child again, wanting to know all the unknowable things, beginning to question everything. We know we're never really going to find the answers, because these kinds of questions come from having a hunger and a passion for life—they have nothing to do with resolving anything or tying it all up into a neat little package. This kind of questioning is the journey itself. The fruition lies in beginning to realize our kinship with all humanity. We realize that we have a share in whatever everyone else has and is. Our journey of making friends with ourselves is not a selfish thing. We're not trying to get all the goodies for ourselves. It's a process of developing loving-kindness and a true understanding for other people as well.

## *Finding Our Own True Nature*

IN ONE OF the Buddha's discourses, he talks about the four kinds of horses: the excellent horse, the good horse, the poor horse, and the really bad horse. The excellent horse, according to the sutra, moves before the whip even touches its back; just the shadow of the whip or the slightest sound from the driver is enough to make the horse move. The good horse runs at the lightest touch of the whip on its back. The poor horse doesn't go until it feels pain, and the very bad horse doesn't budge until the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones.

When Shunryu Suzuki tells the story in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he says that when people hear this sutra, they always want to be the best horse, but actually, when we sit, it doesn't matter whether we're the best horse or the worst horse. He goes on to say that in fact, the really terrible horse is the best practitioner.

What I have realized through practicing is that practice isn't about being the best horse or the good horse or the poor horse or the worst horse. It's about finding our own true nature and speaking from that, acting from that. Whatever our quality is, that's our wealth and our beauty; that's what other people respond to.

Once I had an opportunity to talk with Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, about the fact that I was not able to do my practice properly. I had just started the vajrayana<sup>2</sup> practices and I was supposed to be visualizing. I couldn't visualize anything. I tried and tried but there was just nothing at all; I felt like a fraud doing the practice because it didn't feel natural to me. I was quite miserable because everybody else seemed to be having all kinds of visualizations and doing very well. He said, "I'm always suspicious of the ones who say everything's going well. If you think that things are going well, there's usually some kind of arrogance. If it's too easy for you, you just relax. You don't make a real effort, and therefore you never find out what it is to be fully human." So he encouraged me by saying that as long as you have these kinds of doubts, your practice will be good. When you begin to think that everything is just perfect and feel complacent and superior to the others, watch out!

Dainin Katagiri Roshi once told a story about his own experience of being the worst horse. When he first came to the United States from Japan, he was a young monk in his late twenties. He had been a monk in Japan—where everything was so precise, so clean, and so neat—for a long time. In the U.S. his students were hippies with long, unwashed hair and ragged clothes and no shoes. He didn't like them. He couldn't help it—he just couldn't stand those hippies. Their style offended everything he stood for. He said, "So all day I would give talks about compassion, and at night I would go home and weep and cry because I realized I had no compassion at all. Because I didn't like my students, therefore I had to work much harder to develop my heart." As Suzuki Roshi says in his talk, that's exactly the point: because we find ourselves to be the worst horse, we are inspired to try harder.

At Gampo Abbey we had a Tibetan monk, Lama Sherap Tendar, teaching us to play the Tibetan musical instruments. We had forty-nine days in which to learn the music; we were also going to learn many other things, we thought, during that time. But as it turned out, for forty-nine days, twice a day, all we did was learn to play the cymbals and the drum and how they are played together. Every day we would practice and practice. We would practice on our own, and then we would play for Lama Sherap, who would sit there with this pained little look on his face. Then he would take our hands and show

how to play. Then we would do it by ourselves, and he would sigh. This went on for forty-nine days. He never said that we were doing well, but he was very sweet and very gentle. Finally, when it was over and we had had our last performance, we were making toasts and remarks and Lama Sherap said, “Actually you were very good. You were very good right from the beginning, but I knew if I told you that you were good, you would stop trying.” He was right. He had such a gentle way of encouraging us that it didn’t make us angry with him and it didn’t make us lose heart. It just made us feel that Lama knew the proper way to play the cymbals; he’d been playing these cymbals since he was a little boy, and we just had to keep trying. So for forty-nine days we really worked hard.

We can work with ourselves in the same way. We don’t have to be harsh with ourselves when we think, sitting here, that our meditation or our oryoki or the way we are in the world is in the category of the worst horse. We could be very sympathetic with that and use it as a motivation to keep trying to develop ourselves, to find our own true nature. Not only will we find our own true nature, but we will learn about other people, because in our heart of hearts almost all of us feel that we are the worst horse. You might consider that you yourself are an arrogant person or you might consider that someone else is an arrogant person, but everybody who has ever felt even a moment of arrogance knows that arrogance is just a cover-up for really feeling that you’re the worst horse, and always trying to prove otherwise.

In his talk, Suzuki Roshi says that meditation and the whole process of finding your own true nature is one continuous mistake, and that rather than that being a reason for depression or discouragement it’s actually the motivation. When you find yourself slumping, that’s the motivation to sit up, not out of self-denigration but actually out of pride in everything that occurs to you, pride in who you are just as you are, pride in the goodness or the fairness or the worstness of yourself—however you find yourself—some sort of sense of taking pride and using it to spur you on.

The Karma Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, in which the students of Chögyam Trungpa are trained, is sometimes called the “mishap lineage,” because of the ways in which the wise and venerated teachers of this lineage “blew it” time after time. First there was Tilopa, who was a madman, completely wild. His main student was Naropa. Naropa was so conceptual and intellectual that it took him twelve years of being run over by a truck, of being put through all sorts of trials by his teacher, for him to begin to wake up. He was so conceptual that if somebody would tell him something, he would say, “Oh yes, but surely by *that* you must mean *this*.” He had that kind of mind. His main student was Marpa, who was famous for his intensely bad temper. He used to fly into rages, beat people, and yell at them. He was also a drunk. He was notorious for being incredibly stubborn. His student was Milarepa. Milarepa was a murderer! Rinpoche used to say that Marpa became a student of the dharma because he thought he could make a lot of money by bringing texts back from India and translating them into Tibetan. His student Milarepa became a student because he was afraid he was going to go to hell for having murdered people—that scared him.

Milarepa’s student was Gampopa (after whom Gampo Abbey is named). Because everything was so easy for him, Gampopa was arrogant. For instance, the night before he met Gampopa for the first time Milarepa said to some of his disciples, “Oh, someone who is destined to be my main student is going to come tomorrow. Whoever brings him to me will be greatly benefited.” So when Gampopa arrived in the town, an old lady who saw him ran out and said, “Oh, Milarepa told us you were coming and that you were destined to be one of his main students, and I want my daughter to bring you to see him.” So Gampopa, thinking, “I must be really hot stuff,” went very proudly to meet Milarepa, sure that he would be greeted with great honor. However, Milarepa had had someone put him in a cave and he wouldn’t see Gampopa for three weeks.

As for Gampopa’s main student, the first Karmapa, the only thing we know about him is that he was extremely ugly. He was said to look like a monkey. Also, there’s one story about him and three other

main disciples of Gampopa who were thrown out of the monastery for getting drunk and singing and dancing and breaking the monastic rules.

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We could all take heart. These are the wise ones who sit in front of us, to whom we prostrate when we do prostrations. We can prostrate to them as an example of our own wisdom mind of enlightened beings, but perhaps it's also good to prostrate to them as confused, mixed-up people with a lot of neurosis, just like ourselves. They are good examples of people who never gave up on themselves and were not afraid to be themselves, who therefore found their own genuine quality and their own true nature.

The point is that our true nature is not some ideal that we have to live up to. It's who we are right now, and that's what we can make friends with and celebrate.

## *Precision, Gentleness, and Letting Go*

**I**N MEDITATION and in our daily lives there are three qualities that we can nurture, cultivate, and bring out. We already possess these, but they can be ripened: precision, gentleness, and the ability to let go.

When the Buddha taught, he didn't say that we were bad people or that there was some sin that we had committed—original or otherwise—that made us more ignorant than clear, more harsh than gentle, more closed than open. He taught that there is a kind of innocent misunderstanding that we all share, something that can be turned around, corrected, and seen through, as if we were in a dark room and someone showed us where the light switch was. It isn't a sin that we are in the dark room. It's just an innocent situation, but how fortunate that someone shows us where the light switch is. It brightens up our life considerably. We can start to read books, to see one another's faces, to discover the colors of the walls, to enjoy the little animals that creep in and out of the room.

In the same way, if we see our so-called limitations with clarity, precision, gentleness, goodheartedness, and kindness and, having seen them fully, then let go, open further, we begin to find that our world is more vast and more refreshing and fascinating than we had realized before. In other words, the key to feeling more whole and less shut off and shut down is to be able to see clearly what we are and what we're doing.

The innocent mistake that keeps us caught in our own particular style of ignorance, unkindness, and shut-downness is that we are never encouraged to see clearly what is, with gentleness. Instead, there is a kind of basic misunderstanding that we should try to be better than we already are, that we should try to improve ourselves, that we should try to get away from painful things, and that if we could just learn how to get away from the painful things, then we would be happy. That is the innocent, naive misunderstanding that we all share, which keeps us unhappy.

Meditation is about seeing clearly the body that we have, the mind that we have, the domestic situation that we have, the job that we have, and the people who are in our lives. It's about seeing how we react to all these things. It's seeing our emotions and thoughts just as they are right now, in this very moment, in this very room, on this very seat. It's about not trying to make them go away, not trying to become better than we are, but just seeing clearly with precision and gentleness. Throughout this month of meditation practice, we will work with cultivating gentleness, innate precision, and the ability to let go of small-mindedness, learning how to open to our thoughts and emotions, to all the people we meet in our world, how to open our minds and hearts.

This is not an improvement plan; it is not a situation in which you try to be better than you are now. If you have a bad temper and you feel that you harm yourself and others, you might think that sitting for a week or a month will make your bad temper go away—you will be that sweet person that you always wanted to be. Never again will a harsh word leave your lily-white lips. The problem is that the desire to change is fundamentally a form of aggression toward yourself. The other problem is that our hangups, unfortunately or fortunately, contain our wealth. Our neurosis and our wisdom are made of the same material. If you throw out your neurosis, you also throw out your wisdom. Someone who is very angry also has a lot of energy; that energy is what's so juicy about him or her. That's the reason people love that person. The idea isn't to try to get rid of your anger, but to make friends with

it, to see it clearly with precision and honesty, and also to see it with gentleness. That means not judging yourself as a bad person, but also not bolstering yourself up by saying, “It’s good that I’m this way, it’s right that I’m this way. Other people are terrible, and I’m right to be so angry at them all the time.” The gentleness involves not repressing the anger but also not acting it out. It is something much softer and more openhearted than any of that. It involves learning how, once you have fully acknowledged the feeling of anger and the knowledge of who you are and what you do, to let it go. You can let go of the usual pitiful little story line that accompanies anger and begin to see clearly how you keep the whole thing going. So whether it’s anger or craving or jealousy or fear or depression—whatever it might be—the notion is not to try to get rid of it, but to make friends with it. That means getting to know it completely, with some kind of softness, and learning how, once you’ve experienced it fully, to let go.

The meditation technique itself cultivates precision, gentleness, and the ability to let go—qualities that are innate within us. They are not something that we have to gain, but something that we can bring out, cultivate, rediscover in ourselves. Now I’d like to discuss the meditation technique and point out how it helps bring out these qualities.

### *Precision*

The technique is, first, to take good posture and, second, to become mindful of your out-breath. This is just your ordinary out-breath, not manipulated or controlled in any way. Be with the breath as it goes out, feel the breath go out, touch the breath as it goes out. Now, this seems simple, but to actually be with that breath and to be there for every breath requires a lot of precision. When you sit down and begin to meditate, the fact that you always come back to that breath brings out the precision, the clarity, and the accuracy of your mind. Just the fact that you always come back to this breath and that you try, in a gentle way, to be as fully with the breath as you can sharpens your mind.

The third part of the technique is that, when you realize that you’ve been thinking, you say to yourself, “Thinking.” Now, that also requires a lot of precision. Even if you wake up as if from a dream and realize that you’ve been thinking, and you immediately go back to the breath and accidentally forget about the labeling, even then you should just pause a little bit and say to yourself, “Thinking.” Use the label, because the label is so precise. Just acknowledge that you’ve been thinking just that, no more, no less, just “thinking.” Being with the out-breath cultivates the precision of your mind, and when you label, that too brings out the precision of your mind. Your mind becomes more clear and stabilized. As you sit, you might want to be aware of this.

### *Gentleness*

If we emphasized only precision, our meditation might become quite harsh and militant. It might get too goal-oriented. So we also emphasize gentleness. One thing that is very helpful is to cultivate an overall sense of relaxation while you are doing the meditation. I think you’ll notice that as you become more mindful and more aware and awake, you begin to notice that your stomach tends to get very tense and your shoulders tend to get very tight. It helps a lot if you notice this and then purposefully relax your stomach, relax your shoulders and your neck. If you find it difficult to relax, just gradually and patiently, gently work with it.

When the breath goes out, not only does it ripen the precision of our minds, but it also brings out this inherent gentle quality, this quality of heart or warmth, of kindness, because the attention to the breath is very soft. If you were doing a technique that said, “Concentrate on the out-breath, have on

hundred percent attention on the out-breath” (and there are techniques like that which are very beneficial), that would be cultivating precision, but not gentleness. But since this technique is ripening not only precision, but also gentleness, the instruction is that there is only twenty-five percent awareness on the out-breath, which is really very little. The truth of the matter is that if you are concentrating on the out-breath and *only* on the out-breath, you’re not being aware of the person next to you, of the lights going on and off, of the sound of the ocean. However, in this technique, because your eyes are open and because the gaze is not a tight gaze and because the whole emphasis of the practice is one of openness, even though you’re mindful of the out-breath, you’re not shutting out all the other things that are going on. So it’s only twenty-five percent awareness on the out-breath. The other awareness is less specific; it’s simply that you are alive in this room with all the different things that are occurring here. So we give the instruction, “Be mindful of your out-breath, be with your out-breath,” and that’s what you do. But the instruction that the awareness is only twenty-five percent really brings home the idea that it’s not a concentration practice—there’s a very light touch on the breath as it goes out. Touch the breath and let it go. The touch is the precision part and also the softness part. Touch it very softly and let it go.

If the object of meditation were something concrete, something solid and graspable—an image on a wall, a statue or a dot on the floor or a candle—it would be much more of a concentration exercise. But the breath is very elusive; even if you wanted to give it one hundred percent attention, it would be difficult because it is so ephemeral, so light, so airy and spacious. As the object of meditation, it brings a sense of softness and gentleness. It’s like being mindful of a gentle breeze, but in this case it’s our ordinary, uncontrived out-breath. This technique with the breath is said to be without a goal. You are not doing it to achieve anything except to be fully present. Being fully present isn’t something that happens once and then you have achieved it; it’s being awake to the ebb and flow and movement and creation of life, being alive to the process of life itself. That also has its softness. If there were a goal that you were supposed to achieve, such as “no thoughts,” that wouldn’t be very soft. You’d have to struggle a lot to get rid of all those thoughts, and you probably couldn’t do it anyway. The fact that there is no goal also adds to the softness.

The moment when you label your thoughts “thinking” is probably the key place in the technique where you cultivate gentleness, sympathy, and loving-kindness. Rinpoche used to say, “Notice your tone of voice when you say ‘thinking.’” It might be really harsh, but actually it’s just a euphemism for “Drat! You were thinking again, gosh darn it, you dummy.” You might really be saying, “You fool! You absolutely miserable meditator, you’re hopeless.” But it’s not that at all. All that’s happened is that you’ve noticed. Good for you, you actually noticed! You’ve noticed that mind thinks continuously, and it’s wonderful that you’ve seen that. Having seen it, let the thoughts go. Say “Thinking.” If you notice that you’re being harsh, say it a second time just to cultivate the feeling that you could say it to yourself with gentleness and kindness, in other words, that you are cultivating a nonjudgmental attitude. You are not criticizing yourself, you are just seeing what *is* with precision and gentleness, seeing thinking as thinking. That is how this technique cultivates not only precision but also softness, gentleness, a sense of warmth toward oneself. The honesty of precision and the goodheartedness of gentleness are qualities of making friends with yourself. So during this period along with being as precise as you can, really emphasize the softness. If you find your body tensing, relax it. If you find your mind tensing, relax it. Feel the expansiveness of the breath going out into the space. When thoughts come up, touch them very lightly, like a feather touching a bubble. Let the whole thing be soft and gentle, but at the same time precise.

*Letting Go*

The third aspect of the technique is the quality of opening or letting go. This seemingly simple technique helps us rediscover this ability that we already have to open beyond small-mindedness and to let go of any kind of fixation or limited view. Precision and gentleness are somewhat tangible. You can work on being more accurate with the out-breath, more accurate with the label. You can relax your stomach and your shoulders and your body, and you can be softer with the out-breath and more sympathetic with the labeling. But letting go is not so easy. Rather, it's something that happens as a result of working with precision and gentleness. In other words, as you work with being really faithful to the technique and being as precise as you can and simultaneously as kind as you can, the ability to let go seems to happen to you. The discovery of your ability to let go spontaneously arises; you don't force it. You shouldn't be forcing accuracy or gentleness either, but while you *could* make a project out of accuracy, you *could* make a project out of gentleness, it's hard to make a project out of letting go. Nevertheless, I'll describe how the technique leads you toward this rediscovery of your ability to let go and to open.

You may have wondered why we are mindful of our out-breath and only our out-breath. Why don't we pay attention to the out-breath *and* the in-breath? There are other excellent techniques that instruct the meditator to be mindful of the breath going out and mindful of the breath coming in. This technique definitely sharpens the mind and brings a sense of one-pointed, continuous mindfulness, with no breath in it. But in this meditation technique, we are with the out-breath; there's no particular instruction about what to do until the next out-breath. Inherent in this technique is the ability to let go at the end of the out-breath, to open at the end of the out-breath, because for a moment there's actually no instruction about what to do. There's a possibility of what Rinpoche used to call "gap" at the end of the out-breath: you're mindful of your breath as it goes out, and then there's a pause as the breath comes in. It's as if you . . . pause. It doesn't help at all to say, "Don't be mindful of the in-breath"—that's like saying, "Don't think of a pink elephant." When you're told not to be mindful of something, it becomes an obsession. Nevertheless, the mindfulness is on the out-breath, and there's some sense of just waiting for the next out-breath, a sense of no project. One could just let go at the end of the out-breath. Breath goes out and dissolves, and there could be some sense of letting go completely. Nothing to hold on to until the next out-breath.

Even though it's difficult to do, as you begin to work with mindfulness of the out-breath, then the pause, just waiting, and then mindfulness of the next out-breath, the sense of being able to let go gradually begins to dawn on you. So you don't have any high expectations—just do the technique. As the months and years go by, the way you regard the world will begin to change. You will learn what it is to let go and what it is to open beyond limited beliefs and ideas about things.

The experience of labeling your thoughts "thinking" also, over time, becomes much more vivid. You may be completely caught up in a fantasy, in remembering the past or planning for the future, or you may be completely caught up, as if you had gotten on an airplane and flown away someplace. You're somewhere and you are with other people and you've redecorated a room or you've relived a pleasant or unpleasant experience or you've gotten all caught up in worrying about something that might happen or you're getting a lot of pleasure from thinking about something that may happen, but you're completely involved as if in a dream. Then suddenly you realize, and you just come back. It happens automatically. You say to yourself, "Thinking," and as you're saying that, basically what you are doing is letting go of those thoughts. You don't repress the thoughts. You acknowledge them as "thinking" very clearly and kindly, but then you let them go. Once you begin to get the hang of this, it's incredibly powerful that you could be completely obsessed with hope and fear and all kinds of other thoughts and you could realize what you've been doing—without criticizing it—and you could just let it go. This is probably one of the most amazing tools that you could be given, the ability to just let things go, not to be caught in the grip of your own angry thoughts or passionate thoughts or worri-



thoughts or depressed thoughts.

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## *The Wisdom of No Escape*

**Y**ESTERDAY I talked about cultivating precision, gentleness, and openness, and described how this meditation technique helps us remember the qualities that we already possess. Now, sometimes the teachings emphasize the wisdom, brilliance, or sanity that we possess, and sometimes they emphasize the obstacles, how it is that we feel stuck in a small, dark place. These are actually two sides of one coin: when they are put together, inspiration (or well-being) and burden (or suffering) describe the human condition. That's what we see when we meditate.

We see how beautiful and wonderful and amazing things are, and we see how caught up we are. It isn't that one is the bad part and one is the good part, but that it's a kind of interesting, smelly, rich, fertile mess of stuff. When it's all mixed up together, it's us: humanness. This is what we are here to see for ourselves. Suffering and joy are here all the time; they interpenetrate each other. For a fully enlightened being, the difference between what is neurosis and what is wisdom is very hard to perceive, because somehow the energy underlying both of them is the same. The basic creative energy of life—life force—bubbles up and courses through all of existence. It can be experienced as open and free, unburdened, full of possibility, energizing. Or this very same energy can be experienced as petty, narrow, stuck, caught. Even though there are so many teachings, so many meditations, so many different instructions, the basic point of it all is just to learn to be extremely honest and also wholehearted about what exists in your mind—thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, the whole thing that adds up to what we call “me” or “I.” Nobody else can really begin to sort out for you what to accept and what to reject in terms of what wakes you up and what makes you fall asleep. No one else can really sort out for you what to accept—what opens up your world—and what to reject—what seems to keep you going round and round in some kind of repetitive misery. This meditation is called nontheistic, which doesn't have anything to do with believing in God or not believing in God, but means that nobody but yourself can tell you what to accept and what to reject.

The practice of meditation helps us get to know this basic energy really well, with tremendous honesty and warmheartedness, and we begin to figure out for ourselves what is poison and what is medicine, which means something different for each of us. For example, some people can drink a lot of coffee and it really wakes them up and they feel great; others can drink just a thimbleful and become a nervous wreck. Everything we eat affects each of us differently; so it is with how we relate with our own energies. We are the only ones who know what wakes us up and what puts us to sleep. So we sit here on these red cushions in this brightly lit room with this fancy, colorful shrine and this huge picture of the Karmapa. Outside, the snow is falling and the wind howling. Hour after hour we sit here and just come back to the present moment as much as we can, acknowledge what's going on in our minds, come back to the present moment as much as we can, acknowledge what's going on in our minds, follow the out-breath, label our thoughts “thinking,” come back to the present moment, acknowledge what's going on in our minds. The instruction is to be as honest and warmhearted in the process as you can, to learn gradually what it means to let go of holding on and holding back.

The message is that each of us has all that it takes to become fully enlightened. We have basic energy coursing through us. Sometimes it manifests as brilliance and sometimes it manifests as confusion. Because we are decent, basically good people, we ourselves can sort out what to accept and

what to reject. We can discern what will make us complete, sane, grown-up people, and what—if we are too involved in it—will keep us children forever. This is the process of making friends with ourselves and with our world. It involves not just the parts we like, but the whole picture, because all has a lot to teach us.

ALMOST A YEAR AGO, a dear friend of ours, Sister Ayya Khema, a German woman who is a Theravadin nun living in Sri Lanka, came to visit us and to lead a *vipashyana* (insight meditation) retreat. The retreat for me personally was something of a revelation, because she emphasized joy. I hadn't realized how much emphasis I had put on suffering in my own practice. I had focused on coming to terms with the unpleasant, unacceptable, embarrassing, and painful things that I had to do. In the process, I had very subtly forgotten about joy.

In our seven-day silent retreat, Ayya Khema taught us that each of us has in our heart a joy that is accessible to us; by connecting to it and letting it flower, we allow ourselves to celebrate our practice and our lives. Joy is like a soft spring rain that allows us to lighten up, to enjoy ourselves, and therefore it's a whole new way of looking at suffering.

In a little book called *A Guide to Walking Meditation*, in the chapter "The World Contains All the Wonders of the Pure Land," Thich Nhat Hanh says, "I don't think that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the three times will criticize me for giving you a little secret, that there is no need to go somewhere else to find the wonders of the Pure Land." That sense of wonder and delight is present in every moment, every breath, every step, every movement of our own ordinary everyday lives, if we can connect with it. The greatest obstacle to connecting with our joy is resentment.

Joy has to do with seeing how big, how completely unobstructed, and how precious things are. Resenting what about your life are like refusing to smell the wild roses when you go for a morning walk, or like being so blind that you don't see a huge black raven when it lands in the tree that you're sitting under. We can get so caught up in our own personal pain or worries that we don't notice that the wind has come up or that somebody has put flowers on the diningroom table or that when we walked out in the morning, the flags weren't up, and that when we came back, they were flying. Resentment, bitterness, and holding a grudge prevent us from seeing and hearing and tasting and delighting.

There is a story of a woman running away from tigers. She runs and runs, and the tigers are getting closer and closer. When she comes to the edge of a cliff, she sees some vines there, so she climbs down and holds on to the vines. Looking down, she sees that there are tigers below her as well. She then notices that a mouse is gnawing away at the vine to which she is clinging. She also sees a beautiful little bunch of strawberries close to her, growing out of a clump of grass. She looks up and she looks down. She looks at the mouse. Then she takes a strawberry, puts it in her mouth, and enjoys it thoroughly.

Tigers above, tigers below. This is actually the predicament that we are always in, in terms of our birth and death. Each moment is just what it is. It might be the only moment of our life, it might be the only strawberry we'll ever eat. We could get depressed about it, or we could finally appreciate and delight in the preciousness of every single moment of our life.

Trungpa Rinpoche always used to say, "You can do it." That was probably one of his main teachings, "You can do it." Thich Nhat Hanh, in his *Guide to Walking Meditation*, begins by talking about how everybody carries around this burden, and if you want to put it off, if you want to lay down, you *can* do it. You *can* connect with the joy in your heart.

On a day of silence like today, when things are very still, you may find that you are feeling grim and doing everything with a grim expression: grimly opening the door, grimly drinking your tea, concentrating so hard on being quiet and still and moving slowly that you're miserable. On the other hand, you could just relax and realize that, behind all the worry, complaint, and disapproval that goes on in your mind, the sun is always coming up in the morning, moving across the sky, and going down in the evening. The birds are always out there collecting their food and making their nests and flying across the sky. The grass is always being blown by the wind or standing still. Food and flowers and trees are growing out of the earth. There's enormous richness. You could develop your passion for life and your curiosity and your interest. You could connect with your joyfulness. You could start right now.

The Navajo teach their children that every morning when the sun comes up, it's a brand-new sun. It's born each morning, it lives for the duration of one day, and in the evening it passes on, never to return again. As soon as the children are old enough to understand, the adults take them out at dawn and they say, "The sun has only one day. You must live this day in a good way, so that the sun won't have wasted precious time." Acknowledging the preciousness of each day is a good way to live, a good way to reconnect with our basic joy.

## *Taking a Bigger Perspective*

**T**HIS MORNING when I came to meditation I was hungry and tired; I was also happy. When we took the morning walk, I felt even happier, and I realized it had to do with something that happens to us when we practice: we find that we have a bigger perspective on our lives. This feels almost like a blessing or a gift.

In many traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, the circle is a powerful symbol for the sacredness of all things. Throughout these traditions, there are rituals in which the image of the circle is used like this: by drawing a circle around yourself and standing in the middle of it, you realize that you are always at the center of the universe. The circle that surrounds you shows you that you're always in the sacred space.

In Buddhism we talk about mindfulness and awareness. We're taught mindfulness through oryoki and through bowing, and through being with the breath, labeling our thoughts "thinking." There's a lot of precision, but also a lot of gentleness. Along with being very precise about our world, there's always space around us that is called gentleness: we allow ourselves to experience how large and fluid and full of color and energy our world is. This space is our circle.

When we talk about mindfulness and awareness, we're not talking about something stern, a discipline that we impose on ourselves so that we can clean up our act and be better and stand up straighter and smell nicer. It's more that we practice some sense of loving-kindness toward our microphones and oryoki bowls and our hands and each other and this room and all the doors we go in and out of. Mindfulness is loving all the details of our lives, and awareness is the natural thing that happens: life begins to open up, and you realize that you're always standing at the center of the world.

Some of you may have read a book called *Black Elk Speaks*, in which an old Plains Indian man tells how he had a great vision when he was nine years old. He became so sick that everyone thought he was dead. He was in a coma for a week or more, during which he was shown how the sacred way of life which his people lived was going to be lost. He was also shown ways to help save it from being completely lost. In this coma he was taken to the top of Harney Peak, in the Black Hills of Dakota, which the Native Americans of the United States regard as the center of the world. But after he had been taken to Harney Peak and been given this great vision, Black Elk said that he realized that everywhere was the center of the world. Basically, everywhere you are is the center of the world. You're always standing in the middle of sacred space, standing in the middle of the circle.

People often say, "Meditation is all very well, but what does it have to do with my life?" What it has to do with your life is that perhaps through this simple practice of paying attention—giving loving-kindness to your speech and your actions and the movements of your mind—you begin to realize that you're always standing in the middle of a sacred circle, and that's your whole life. The room is not the sacred circle. Gampo Abbey is not the sacred circle. Wherever you go for the rest of your life, you're always in the middle of the universe and the circle is always around you. Everyone who walks up to you has entered that sacred space, and it's not an accident. Whatever comes into that space is there to teach you.

Through my experience of Buddhism and my deep love and respect for my teachers, the teachings, and the practices, I've come to see that it's good to stick to one vehicle and go deeper and deeper and

deeper. But by doing this, I've begun to see the sacredness of everybody's wisdom and the fact that people discover the same truths through many avenues. Meditation begins to open up your life, so that you're not caught in self-concern, just wanting life to go your way. In that case you no longer realize that you're standing at the center of the world, that you're in the middle of a sacred circle, because you're so concerned with your worries, pains, limitations, desires, and fears that you are blind to the beauty of existence. All you feel by being caught up like this is misery, as well as enormous resentment about life in general. How strange! Life is such a miracle, and a lot of the time we feel only resentment about how it's all working out for us.

There was once a woman who was arrogant and proud. She decided she wanted to attain enlightenment, so she asked all the authorities how to do that. One said, "Well, if you climb to the top of this very high mountain, you'll find a cave there. Sitting inside that cave is a very wise old woman and she will tell you." So the woman thought, "Good, I'll do that. Nothing but the best." Having endured great hardships, she finally found this cave, and sure enough, sitting there was this very gentle, spiritual-looking old woman in white clothes who smiled at her beatifically. Overcome with awe and respect, she prostrated at the feet of this woman and said, "I want to attain enlightenment. Show me how." The wise woman looked at her with her beatific smile and asked, "Are you sure you want to attain enlightenment?" And the woman said, "Of course I'm sure." Whereupon the smiling woman turned into a demon, stood up brandishing a great big stick, and started chasing her, saying "Now! Now! Now!" For the rest of her life, that lady could never get away from the demon who was always saying, "Now!"

So often Rinpoche would talk about nowness. The chapters "Nowness" and "Discovering Magic" in his book *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* are all about what I'm saying here. If you want to attain enlightenment, you have to do it now. If you're arrogant and stubborn, it may take someone running after you with a stick. But the more you open your heart, the more you make friends with your body, speech, mind, and the world that's inside of your circle—your domestic situation, the people you live with, the house you find yourself eating breakfast in every day—the more you appreciate the fact that when you turn on the tap, water comes out. If you have ever lived without water, you really appreciate that. There are all kinds of miracles. Everything is like that, absolutely wonderful.

Now. That's the key. Now, now, now. Mindfulness trains you to be awake and alive, fully curious about what? Well, about *now*, right? You sit in meditation and the out-breath is now and waking up from your fantasies is now and even the fantasies are now, although they seem to take you into the past and into the future. The more you can be completely *now*, the more you realize that you're in the center of the world, standing in the middle of a sacred circle. It's no small affair, whether you're brushing your teeth or cooking your food or wiping your bottom. Whatever you're doing, you're doing it now.

Our life's work is to use what we have been given to wake up. If there were two people who were exactly the same—same body, same speech, same mind, same mother, same father, same house, same food, everything the same—one of them could use what he has to wake up and the other could use it to become more resentful, bitter, and sour. It doesn't matter what you're given, whether it's physical deformity or enormous wealth or poverty, beauty or ugliness, mental stability or mental instability, life in the middle of a madhouse or life in the middle of a peaceful, silent desert. Whatever you're given can wake you up or put you to sleep. That's the challenge of now: What are you going to do with what you have already—your body, your speech, your mind?

Here's something that's very helpful to know about now. The biggest obstacle to taking a bigger perspective on life is that our emotions capture and blind us. The more sensitive we become to things, the more we realize that when we start getting angry or denigrating ourselves or craving things in a way that makes us feel miserable, we begin to shut down, shut out, as if we were sitting on the edge

the Grand Canyon but we had put a big black bag over our heads.

~~You can experiment with this. You can go out there to the cliffs overlooking the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, and the first hit is always, "Wow! It's so big," and your mind opens. But if you stand there long enough, you'll start to worry about something. Then you realize (if you want to do this as an exercise) that it feels as if everything is closing down and getting very small. The trick about now is that you can let go and open up again to that space. You can do that at any moment, always. But it does take making friends with yourself. It does take coming to know your anger, coming to know your self-deprecation, coming to know your craving and wanting, coming to know your boredom, and making friends with those things.~~

There's another story that you may have read that has to do with what we call heaven and hell, life and death, good and bad. It's a story about how those things don't really exist except as a creation of our own minds. It goes like this: A big burly samurai comes to the wise man and says, "Tell me the nature of heaven and hell." And the roshi looks him in the face and says: "Why should I tell a scruffy, disgusting, miserable slob like you?" The samurai starts to get purple in the face, his hair starts to stand up, but the roshi won't stop, he keeps saying, "A miserable worm like you, do you think I should tell you anything?" Consumed by rage, the samurai draws his sword, and he's just about to cut off the head of the roshi. Then the roshi says, "That's hell." The samurai, who is in fact a sensitive person, instantly gets it, that he just created his own hell; he was deep in hell. It was black and hot, filled with hatred, self-protection, anger, and resentment, so much so that he was going to kill this man. Tears filled his eyes and he starts to cry and he puts his palms together and the roshi says, "That's heaven."

There isn't any hell or heaven except for how we relate to our world. Hell is just resistance to life. When you want to say no to the situation you're in, it's fine to say no, but when you build up a big case to the point where you're so convinced that you would draw your sword and cut off someone's head, that kind of resistance to life is hell.

In the way we practice, we don't say, "Hell is bad and heaven is good" or "Get rid of hell and just seek heaven," but we encourage ourselves to develop an open heart and an open mind to heaven, hell, to everything. Why? Because only then can we realize that no matter what comes along, we're always standing at the center of the world in the middle of sacred space, and everything that comes into that circle and exists with us there has come to teach us what we need to know.

Life's work is to wake up, to let the things that enter into the circle wake you up rather than put you to sleep. The only way to do this is to open, be curious, and develop some sense of sympathy for everything that comes along, to get to know its nature and let it teach you what it will. It's going to stick around until you learn your lesson, at any rate. You can leave your marriage, you can quit your job, you can only go where people are going to praise you, you can manipulate your world until you're blue in the face to try to make it always smooth, but the same old demons will always come up until finally you have learned your lesson, the lesson they came to teach you. Then those same demons will appear as friendly, warmhearted companions on the path.

So that's why, this morning, even though I was very hungry and tired, I was also very happy. And I would like to express my gratitude to Trungpa Rinpoche for that.



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