

"Chödrön's voice is gently humorous, always kind, and seemingly infinitely wise."
—*Los Angeles Times*

COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY



108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion

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fearful heart to the restlessness of our own energy. We learn to abide with the experience of our emotional distress.

4. *Attention to the present 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.

These four factors not only apply to sitting meditation, but are essential to all the bodhichitta practices and for relating with difficult situations in our daily lives. By cultivating them we can start to train as a warrior, discovering for ourselves that it is bodhichitta, not confusion, that is basic.

The Root of Suffering

What keeps us unhappy and stuck in a limited view of reality is our tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain, to seek security and avoid groundlessness, to seek comfort and avoid discomfort. This is how we keep ourselves enclosed in a cocoon. Out there are all the planets and all the galaxies and vast space, but we're stuck here in this cocoon. Moment after moment, we're deciding that we would rather stay in that cocoon than step out into that big space. Life in our cocoon is cozy and secure. We've gotten it all together. It's safe, it's predictable, it's convenient, and it's trustworthy. If we feel ill at ease, we just fill in those gaps.

Our mind is always seeking zones of safety. We're in this zone of safety and that's what we consider life, getting it all together, security. Death is losing that. We fear losing our illusion of security—that's what makes us anxious. We fear being confused and not knowing which way to turn. We want to know what's happening. The

mind is always seeking zones of safety, and these zones of safety are continually falling apart. Then we scramble to get another zone of safety back together again. We spend all our energy and waste our lives trying to recreate these zones of safety, which are always falling apart. That's the essence of samsara—the cycle of suffering that comes from continuing to seek happiness in all the wrong places.

Weather and the Four Noble Truths

In the Buddha's first teaching—called the four noble truths—he talked about suffering. The first noble truth says that it's part of being human to feel discomfort. Nothing in its essence is one way or the other. All around us the wind, the fire, the earth, the water, are always taking on different qualities; they're like magicians. We also change like the weather. We ebb and flow like the tides, we wax and wane like the moon. We fail to see that like the weather, we are fluid, not solid. And so we suffer.

The second noble truth says that resistance is the fundamental operating mechanism of what we call ego, that resisting life causes suffering. Traditionally it's said that the cause of suffering is clinging to our narrow view, which is to say, we are addicted to ME. We resist that we change and flow like the weather, that we have the same energy as all living things. When we resist, we dig in our heels. We make ourselves really solid. Resisting is what's called ego.

against the fundamental ambiguity of our situation, expending tremendous energy trying to ward off impermanence and death. We don't like it that our bodies change shape. We don't like it that we age. We are afraid of wrinkles and sagging skin. We use health products as if we actually believe that *our* skin, *our* hair, *our* eyes and teeth, might somehow miraculously escape the truth of impermanence.

The Buddhist teachings aspire to set us free from this limited way of relating to impermanence. They encourage us to relax gradually and wholeheartedly into the ordinary and obvious truth of change. Acknowledging this truth doesn't mean that we're looking on the dark side. What it means is that we begin to understand that we're not the only one who can't keep it all together. We no longer believe that there are people who have managed to avoid uncertainty.

Not Causing Harm

Learning not to cause harm to ourselves or others is a basic Buddhist teaching. Nonaggression has the power to heal. Not harming ourselves or others is the basis of enlightened society. This is how there could be a sane world. It starts with sane citizens, and that is us. The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.

The ground of not causing harm is mindfulness, a sense of clear seeing with respect and compassion for what it is we see. This is what basic practice shows us. But mindfulness doesn't stop with formal meditation. It helps us relate with all the details of our lives. It helps us see and hear and smell without closing our eyes or our ears or our noses. It's a lifetime's journey to relate honestly to the immediacy of our experience and to respect ourselves enough not to judge it. As we become more