

The Choice

Feed the Right Wolf

-Pema Chödrön

In this reading we will be encouraged to take a compassionate and honest look at our own minds and the choices we have.

As human beings we have the choice to disentangle ourselves from old habits, and the potential to love and care about each other. We have the choice to wake up and live consciously, but, you may have noticed, we also have a strong inclination to stay asleep. It's as if we are always at a crossroad, continuously choosing which way to go.

Moment by moment, we can choose to go toward further clarity and happiness or toward confusion and pain.

In order to make this choice skillfully, many of us turn to spiritual practices of various kinds with the wish that our lives will lighten up and that we'll find the strength to cope with our difficulties. Yet in these times it seems crucial that we also keep in mind the wider context in which we make choices about how to live: this is the context of our beloved earth and the rather rocky condition it's in.

For many, spiritual practice represents a way to relax and a way to access peace of mind. We want to feel more calm, more focused; and with our frantic and stressful lives, who can blame us? Nevertheless, we have a responsibility to think bigger than that these days. If spiritual practice is relaxing, if it gives us some peace of mind, that's great — but is this personal satisfaction helping us to address what's happening in the world? The main question is, are we living in a way that adds further aggression and self-centeredness to the mix, or are we adding some much-needed sanity? We can choose to go toward further clarity and happiness or toward confusion and pain.

Many of us feel deeply concerned about the state of the world. I know how sincerely people wish for things to change and for beings everywhere to be free of suffering. But if we're honest with ourselves, do we have any idea how to put this aspiration into practice

when it comes to our own lives? Do we have any clarity about how our own words and actions may be causing suffering? And even if we do recognize that we're making a mess of things, do we have a clue about how to stop? These have always been important questions, but they are especially so today.

This is a time when disentangling ourselves is about more than our personal happiness.

Working on ourselves and becoming more conscious about our own minds and emotions may be the only way for us to find solutions that address the welfare of all beings and the survival of the earth itself.

There was a story that was widely circulated a few days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, that illustrates our dilemma. A Native American grandfather was speaking to his grandson about violence and cruelty in the world and how it comes about. He said it was as if two wolves were fighting in his heart. One wolf was vengeful and angry, and the other wolf was understanding and kind. The young man asked his grandfather which wolf would win the fight in his heart. And the grandfather answered, "The one that wins will be the one I choose to feed."

So this is our challenge, the challenge for our spiritual practice and the challenge for the world—how can we train right now, not later, in feeding the right wolf? How can we call on our innate intelligence to see what helps and what hurts, what escalates aggression and what uncovers our good-heartedness? With the global economy in chaos and the environment of the planet at risk, with war raging and suffering escalating, it is time for each of us in our own lives to take the leap and do whatever we can to help turn things around. Even the slightest gesture toward feeding the right wolf will help. Now more than ever, we are all in this together.

Taking the leap involves making a commitment to ourselves and to the earth itself-making a commitment to let go of old grudges, to not avoid people and situations and emotions that make us feel uneasy, to not cling to our fears, our closed-mindedness, our hardheartedness, our hesitation. Now is the time to develop trust in our basic goodness and the basic goodness of our sisters and brothers on this earth; a time to develop confidence

in our ability to drop our old ways of staying stuck and to choose wisely. We could do that right here and right now.

In our everyday encounters, we can live in a way that will help us learn to do this. When we talk to someone we don't like and don't agree with — maybe a family member or a person at work — we tend to spend a great amount of energy sending anger their way. Yet our resentments and self-centeredness, as familiar as they are, are not our basic nature. We all have the natural ability to interrupt old habits. All of us know how healing it is to be kind, how transformative it is to love, what a relief it is to have old grudges drop away. With just a slight shift in perspective, we can realize that people strike out and say mean things for the same reasons we do. With a sense of humor we can see that our sisters and brothers, our partners, our children, our coworkers are driving us crazy the same way we drive other people crazy.

The first step in this learning process is to be honest with ourselves. Most of us have gotten so good at empowering our negativity and insisting on our rightness that the angry wolf gets stronger and stronger, and the other wolf is just there with its pleading eyes. But we're not stuck with this way of being. When we're feeling resentment or any strong emotion, we can recognize that we are getting worked up, and realize that right now we can consciously make the choice to be aggressive or to cool off. It comes down to choosing which wolf we want to feed.

Of course, if we intend to test out this approach, we need some pointers. We need ways to train in this path of choosing wisely. This path entails uncovering three qualities of being human, three basic qualities that have always been with us but perhaps have gotten buried and been almost forgotten. These qualities are natural intelligence, natural warmth, and natural openness. When I say that the potential for goodness exists in all beings, that is acknowledging that everyone, everywhere, all over the globe, has these qualities and can call on them to help themselves and others.

Natural intelligence is always accessible to us. When we're not caught in the trap of control and fear, we intuitively know what's the right thing to do. If we're not obscuring our intelligence with anger, self-pity, or craving, we know what will help and what will make things worse. Our well-perfected emotional reactions cause us to do and say a lot of crazy things. We desire to be happy and at

peace, but when our emotions take over, somehow the methods we use to achieve this happiness only make us more miserable. Our intentions and our actions are, all too frequently, not in synch. Nevertheless, we all have access to a fundamental intelligence that can help to solve our problems rather than making them worse.

Natural warmth is our shared capacity to love, to have empathy, to have a sense of humor. It is also our capacity to feel gratitude and appreciation and tenderness. It's the whole gamut of what often are called the heart qualities, qualities that are a natural part of being human. Natural warmth has the power to heal all relationships — the relationship with ourselves as well as with people, animals, and all that we encounter every day of our lives.

The third quality of basic goodness is natural openness, the spaciousness of our sky-like minds. Fundamentally, our minds are expansive, flexible, and curious; they are pre-prejudice, so to speak. This is the condition of mind before we narrow down into a fear-based view where everyone is either an enemy or a friend, a threat or an ally, someone to like, dislike, or ignore. Fundamentally, this mind that we have, that you and I each have, is open.

Another way to appreciate natural openness is to think of a time when you were angry, when someone said or did something that you didn't like, a time when you wanted to get even or you wanted to vent. Now, what if you had been able to stop, breathe deeply, and slow the process down? Right on the spot you could connect with natural openness. You could stop, give space, and empower the wolf of patience and courage instead of the wolf of aggression and violence. In that moment when we pause, our natural intelligence often comes to our rescue. We have time to reflect: why do we want to make that nasty phone call, say that mean word, or for that matter, drink the drink, or smoke the substance or whatever it might be?

It may be hard to remember at first, but once you start doing it, pausing becomes something that nurtures you.

It's undeniable that we want to do these things because in that heated state we believe it will bring us some relief. Some kind of satisfaction or resolution or comfort will result: we think we'll feel better at the end. But what if we paused, and asked ourselves, "Will I feel better when this is over?" Allowing that openness, that space, gives our natural intelligence a chance to tell us what we already know: that we won't feel better at the end. And how do we know this? Because, believe it or not, this is not the first time we've gotten caught in the same impulse, the same automatic-pilot strategy. If we were to do a poll, probably most people would say that in their personal

lives aggression breeds aggression. It escalates anger and ill will rather than bringing peace.

If right now our emotional reaction to seeing a certain person or hearing certain news is to fly into a rage or to get despondent or something equally extreme, it's because we have been cultivating that particular habit for a very long time. But as my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, we can approach our lives as an experiment. In the next moment, in the next hour, we could choose to stop, to slow down, to be still for a few seconds. We could experiment with interrupting the usual chain reaction, and not spin off in the usual way. We don't need to blame someone else, and we don't need to blame ourselves. When we're in a tight spot, we can experiment with not strengthening the aggression habit and see what happens.

Pausing is very helpful in this process. It creates a momentary contrast between being completely self-absorbed and being awake and present. You just stop for a few seconds, breathe deeply, and move on. You don't want to make it into a project. Chögyam Trungpa used to refer to this as the gap. You pause and allow there to be a gap in whatever you're doing. Throughout the day, you could choose to do this. It may be hard to remember at first, but once you start doing it, pausing becomes something that nurtures you; you begin to prefer it to being all caught up.

People who have found this helpful create ways of interjecting pausing into their busy lives. For instance, they'll put a sign on their computer. It could be a word, or a face, an image, a symbol — anything that reminds them. Or they'll decide, "Every time the phone rings, I'm going to pause." Or "When I go to open my computer, I'm going to pause." Or "When I open the refrigerator, or wait in line, or brush my teeth" You can come up with anything that happens often during your day. You'll just be doing whatever you're doing, and then, for a few seconds, you pause and take three conscious breaths.

Some people have told me that they find it unnerving to pause. One man said if he pauses it feels like death to him. This speaks to the power of habit. We associate acting habitually with security, ground, and comfort. It gives us the feeling of something to hold on to. Our habit is just to keep moving, speeding, talking to ourselves, and filling up the space. But habits are like clothes. We can put them on and we can take them off. Yet, as we well know, when we get very attached to wearing clothes, we don't want to take them off. We feel as if we'll be too exposed, naked in

front of everyone; we'll feel groundless and insecure and we won't know what's going on.

In highly charged situations, or anytime at all, we could shake up our ancient fear-based habits by simply pausing. When we do that, we allow some space to contact the natural openness of our mind and let our natural intelligence emerge. Natural intelligence knows intuitively what will soothe and what will get us more churned up; this can be lifesaving information.

When we pause, we also give ourselves the chance to touch in to our natural warmth. When the heart qualities are awakened, they cut through our negativity in a way that nothing else can.

Currently, the majority of the world's population is far from being able to acknowledge when they're about to explode or even to think it's important to slow the process down. In most cases, that churned-up energy translates quickly into aggressive reactions and speech. Yet, for each and every one of us, intelligence, warmth, and openness are always accessible. If we can be conscious enough to realize what's happening, we can pause and uncover these basic human qualities. The wish for revenge, the prejudiced mind — all of that is temporary and removable. It's not the permanent state. As Chögyam Trungpa put it, "Sanity is permanent, neurosis is temporary."

To honestly face the pain in our lives and the problems in the world, let's start by looking compassionately and honestly at our own minds. We can become intimate with the mind of hatred, the mind that polarizes, the mind that makes somebody "other" and bad and wrong. We come to know, unflinchingly, and with great kindness, the angry, unforgiving, hostile wolf. Over time, that part of ourselves becomes very familiar, but we no longer feed it. Instead, we can make the choice to nurture openness, intelligence, and warmth. This choice, and the attitudes and actions that follow from it, are like a medicine that has the potential to cure all suffering.