

## Being With Chaos

**Times of chaos and challenge can be the most spiritually powerful... if we are brave enough to rest in their space of uncertainty. Pema Chödrön describes three ways to use our problems as the path to awakening and joy: go to the places that scare you, use poison as medicine, and regard what arises as awakened energy.**

- Pema Chodron

Sometimes late at night or on a long walk with a friend, we find ourselves discussing our ideas about how to live and how to act and what is important in life. If we're studying Buddhism and practicing meditation, we might talk of no-self and emptiness, of patience and generosity, of loving-kindness and compassion. We might have just read something or heard some teachings that turned our usual way of seeing things upside down. We feel that we've just reconnected with a truth we've always known and that if we could just learn more about it, our life would be delightful and rich.

We tell our friends of our longing to shed the huge burden we feel we've always carried. We suddenly are excited and feel it's possible. We tell our friend of our inspiration and how it opens up our life. "It is possible," we say, "to enjoy the very same things that usually get us down. We can delight in our job, delight in riding the subway, delight in shoveling snow and paying bills and washing dishes."

You may have noticed, however, that there is frequently an irritating, if not depressing, discrepancy between our ideas and good intentions and how we act when we are confronted with the nitty-gritty details of real life situations.

One afternoon I was riding a bus in San Francisco, reading a very touching article on human suffering and helping others. The idea of being generous and extending myself to those in need became so poignant that I started to cry. People were looking at me as the tears ran down my cheeks. I felt a great tenderness toward everyone, and a commitment to benefit others

arose in me. As soon as I got home, feeling pretty exhausted after working all day, the phone rang, and it was someone asking if I could please help her out by taking her position as a meditation leader that night. I said, "No, sorry, I need to rest," and hung up.

It's not a matter of the right choice or the wrong choice, but simply that we are often presented with a dilemma about bringing together the inspiration of the teachings with what they mean to us on the spot. There is a perplexing tension between our aspirations and the reality of feeling tired, hungry, stressed-out, afraid, bored, angry, or whatever we experience in any given moment of our life.

Naropa, an eleventh-century Indian yogi, one day unexpectedly met an old hag on the street. She apparently knew he was one of the greatest Buddhist scholars in India and asked him if he understood the words of the large book he was holding. He said he did, and she laughed and danced with glee. Then she asked him if he understood the meaning of the teachings in that book. Thinking to please her even more, he again said yes. At that point she became enraged, yelling at him that he was a hypocrite and a liar. That encounter changed Naropa's life. He knew she had his number; truthfully, he only understood the words and not the profound inner meaning of all the teachings he could expound so brilliantly.

This is where we also, to one degree or another, find ourselves. We can kid ourselves for a while that we understand meditation and the teachings, but at some point we have to face it. None of what we've learned seems very relevant when our lover leaves us, when our child has a tantrum in the supermarket, when we're insulted by our colleague. How do we work with our resentment when our boss walks into the room and yells at us? How do we reconcile that frustration and humiliation with our longing to be open and compassionate and not to harm ourselves or others? How do we mix our intention to be alert and gentle in meditation with the reality that we sit down

and immediately fall asleep? What about when we sit down and spend the entire time thinking about how we crave someone or something we saw on the way to the meditation hall? Or we sit down and squirm the whole morning because our knees hurt and our back hurts and we're bored and fed up? Instead of calm, wakeful, and egoless, we find ourselves getting more edgy, irritable, and solid.

This is an interesting place to find oneself. For the practitioner, this is an exceedingly important place.

When Naropa, seeking the meaning behind the words, set out to find a teacher, he continually found himself in this position of being squeezed. Intellectually he knew all about compassion, but when he came upon a filthy, lice-infested dog, he looked away. In the same vein, he knew all about nonattachment and not judging, but when his teacher asked him to do something he disapproved of, he refused.

We continually find ourselves in that squeeze. It's a place where we look for alternatives to just being there. It's an uncomfortable, embarrassing place, and it's often the place where people like ourselves give up. We liked meditation and the teachings when we felt inspired and in touch with ourselves and on the right path. But what about when it begins to feel like a burden, like we made the wrong choice and it's not living up to our expectations at all? The people we are meeting are not all that sane. In fact, they seem pretty confused. The way the place is run is not up to par. Even the teacher is questionable.

This place of the squeeze is the very point in our meditation and in our lives where we can really learn something. The point where we are not able to take it or leave it, where we are caught between a rock and a hard place, caught with both the upliftedness of our ideas and the rawness of what's happening in front of our eyes—that is indeed a very fruitful place.

When we feel squeezed, there's a tendency for mind to become small. We feel miserable, like a victim, like a pathetic, hopeless case. Yet believe it or not, at that moment of hassle or bewilderment or embarrassment, our minds could become bigger. Instead of taking what's occurred as a statement of personal weakness or someone else's power, instead of feeling we are stupid or someone else is unkind, we could drop all the complaints about ourselves and others. We could be

there, feeling off guard, not knowing what to do, just hanging out there with the raw and tender energy of the moment. This is the place where we begin to learn the meaning behind the concepts and the words.

We're so used to running from discomfort, and we're so predictable. If we don't like it, we strike out at someone or beat up on ourselves. We want to have security and certainty of some kind when actually we have no ground to stand on at all.

The next time there's no ground to stand on, don't consider it an obstacle. Consider it a remarkable stroke of luck. We have no ground to stand on, and at the same time it could soften us and inspire us. Finally, after all these years, we could truly grow up. As Trungpa Rinpoche once said, the best mantra is "OM—grow up—svaha."

We are given changes all the time. We can either cling to security, or we can let ourselves feel exposed, as if we had just been born, as if we had just popped out into the brightness of life and were completely naked.

Maybe that sounds too uncomfortable or frightening, but on the other hand, it's our chance to realize that this mundane world is all there is, and we could see it with new eyes and at long last wake up from our ancient sleep of preconceptions.

The truth, said an ancient Chinese master, is neither like this nor like that. It is like a dog yearning over a bowl of burning oil. He can't leave it, because it is too desirable and he can't lick it, because it is too hot.

So how do we relate to that squeeze? Somehow, someone finally needs to encourage us to be inquisitive about this unknown territory and about the unanswerable question of what's going to happen next.

The state of nowness is available in that moment of squeeze. In that awkward, ambiguous moment is our own wisdom mind. Right there in the uncertainty of everyday chaos is our own wisdom mind.

We need encouragement to experiment and try this kind of thing. It's quite daring, and maybe we feel we aren't up to it. But that's the point. Right there in that inadequate, restless feeling is our wisdom mind. We

can simply experiment. There's absolutely nothing to lose. We could experiment with not getting tossed around by right and wrong and with learning to relax with groundlessness.

When I was a child, I had a picture book called Lives of the Saints. It was filled with stories of men and women who had never had an angry or mean thought and had never hurt a fly. I found the book totally useless as a guide for how we humans were supposed to live a good life. For me, The Life of Milarepa, the great Tibetan yogi and poet, is a lot more instructive. Over the years, as I read and reread Milarepa's story, I find myself getting advice for where I am stuck and can't seem to move forward.

To begin with, Milarepa was a murderer, and like most of us when we blow it, he wanted to atone for his errors. And like most of us, in the process of seeking liberation, he frequently fell flat on his face. He lied and stole to get what he wanted, he got so depressed he was suicidal, and he experienced nostalgia for the good old days. Like most of us, he had one person in his life who continually tested him and blew his saintly cover. Even when almost everyone regarded him as one of Tibet's most holy men, his vindictive old aunt continued to beat him with sticks and call him names, and he continued to have to figure out what to do with that kind of humiliating squeeze.

One can be grateful that a long lineage of teachers has worked with holding their seats with the big squeeze. They were tested and failed and still kept exploring how to just stay there, not seeking solid ground. They trained again and again throughout their lives not to give up on themselves and not to run away when the bottom fell out of their concepts and their noble ideals.

From their own experience they have passed along to us the encouragement not to jump over the big squeeze, but to look at it just as it is, not just out of the corner of an eye. They showed us how to experience it fully, not as good or bad, but simply as unconditioned and ordinary.

Through meditation practice, we realize that we don't have to obscure the joy and openness that is present in every moment of our existence. We can awaken to basic goodness, our birthright. When we are able to do this, we no longer feel burdened by depression, worry, or resentment. Life feels spacious, like the sky

and the sea. There's room to relax and breathe and swim, to swim so far out that we no longer have the reference point of the shore.

How do we work with a sense of burden? How do we learn to relate with what seems to stand between us and the happiness we deserve? How do we learn to relax and connect with fundamental joy?

Times are difficult globally; awakening is no longer a luxury or an ideal. It's becoming critical. We don't need to add more depression, more discouragement, or more anger to what's already here. It's becoming essential that we learn how to relate sanely with difficult times. The earth seems to be beseeching us to connect with joy and discover our innermost essence. This is the best way that we can benefit others.

There are three traditional methods for relating directly with difficult circumstances as a path of awakening and joy. The first method we'll call no more struggle; the second, using poison as medicine; and the third, seeing whatever arises as enlightened wisdom. These are three techniques for working with chaos, difficulties, and unwanted events in our daily lives.

**No More Struggle:** Whatever arises, train again and again in seeing it for what it is. The innermost essence of mind is without bias. Things arise and things dissolve forever and ever. Whatever happens, we can look at it with a nonjudgmental attitude. This is the primary method for working with painful situations.

**Using Poison as Medicine:** When suffering arises, we breathe it in for everybody. This poison is not just our personal misfortune. It's our kinship with all living things, the seed of compassion and openness. Instead of pushing it away or running from it, we breathe in and connect with it fully. We do this with the wish that all of us could be free of suffering.

**Regard What Arises as Awakened Energy**  
This reverses our habitual pattern of trying to avoid conflict, trying to smooth things out, trying to prove that pain is a mistake that would not exist in our lives if only we did the right things. This view encourages us to look at the charnel ground of our lives as the working basis for attaining enlightenment.