

Lion's Roar

BUDDHIST WISDOM *for* YOUR LIFE

5 Reasons to Meditate

BY PEMA CHÖDRÖN | FEBRUARY 23, 2016

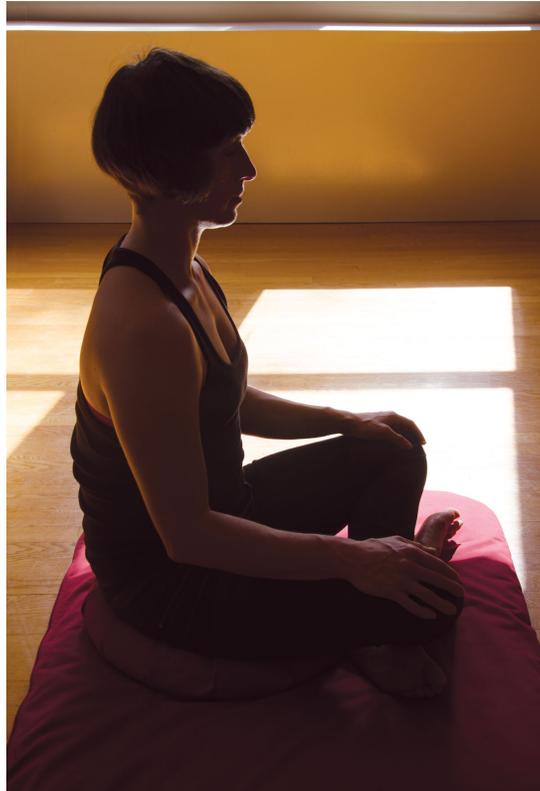


Photo by Liza Matthews.

Yes, it's a strange thing to do — just sit there and do basically nothing. Yet the simple act of stopping, says Pema Chödrön, is the best way to cultivate our good qualities. Here are five ways it makes us better people.

The mind is very wild. The human experience is full of unpredictability and paradox, joys and sorrows, successes and failures. We can't escape any of these experiences in the vast terrain of our existence. It is part of what makes life grand—and it is also why our minds take us on such a crazy ride. If we can train ourselves through meditation to be more open and more accepting toward the wild arc of our experience, if we can lean into the difficulties of life and the ride of

our minds, we can become more settled and relaxed amid whatever life brings us.’

There are numerous ways to work with the mind. One of the most effective is through the tool of sitting meditation. Sitting meditation opens us to each and every moment of our life. Each moment is totally unique and unknown. Our mental world is seemingly predictable and graspable. We believe that thinking through all the events and to-dos of our life will provide us with ground and security. But it’s all a fantasy, and this very moment, free of conceptual overlay, is completely unique. It is absolutely unknown. We’ve never experienced this very moment before, and the next moment will not be the same as the one we are in now. Meditation teaches us how to relate to life directly, so we can truly experience the present moment, free from conceptual overlay.

We do not meditate in order to be comfortable. In other words, we don’t meditate in order to always, all the time, feel good. I imagine shockwaves are passing through you as you read this, because so many people come to meditation to simply “feel better.” However, the purpose of meditation is not to feel bad, you’ll be glad to know. Rather, meditation gives us the opportunity to have an open, compassionate attentiveness to whatever is going on. The meditative space is like the big sky— spacious, vast enough to accommodate anything that arises.

In meditation, our thoughts and emotions can become like clouds that dwell and pass away. Good and comfortable, pleasing and difficult and painful—all of this comes and goes. So the essence of meditation is training in something that is quite radical and definitely not the habitual pattern of the species: and that is to stay with ourselves no matter what is happening, without putting labels of good and bad, right and wrong, pure and impure, on top of our experience.

If meditation was just about feeling good (and I think all of us secretly hope that is what it’s about), we would often feel like we must be doing it wrong. Because at times, meditation can be such a difficult experience. A very common experience of the meditator, in a typical day or on a typical retreat, is the experience of boredom, restlessness, a hurting back, pain in the knees—even the mind might be hurting—so many “not feeling good” experiences. Instead, meditation is about a

compassionate openness and the ability to be with oneself and one's situation through all kinds of experiences. In meditation, you're open to whatever life presents you with. It's about touching the earth and coming back to being right here. While some kinds of meditation are more about achieving special states and somehow transcending or rising above the difficulties of life, the kind of meditation that I've trained in and that I am talking about here is about awakening fully to our life. It's about opening the heart and mind to the difficulties and the joys of life—just as it is. And the fruits of this kind of meditation are boundless.

As we meditate, we are nurturing five qualities that begin to come forth over the months and years that we practice. You might find it helpful to reconnect with these qualities whenever you ask yourself, “Why am I meditating?”

Steadfastness

The first quality—namely, the first thing that we're doing when we meditate—is cultivating and nurturing steadfastness with ourselves. I was talking to someone about this once, and she asked, “Is this steadfastness sort of like loyalty? What are we being loyal to?” Through meditation, we are developing a loyalty to ourselves. This steadfastness that we cultivate in meditation translates immediately into loyalty to one's experience of life.

Steadfastness means that when you sit down to meditate and you allow yourself to experience what's happening in that moment—which could be your mind going a hundred miles an hour, your body twitching, your head pounding, your heart full of fear, whatever comes up—you stay with the experience. That's it. Sometimes you can sit there for an hour and it doesn't get any better. Then you might say, “Bad meditation session. I just had a bad meditation session.” But the willingness to sit there for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, a half hour, an hour, however long you sat there—this is a compassionate gesture of developing loyalty or steadfastness to yourself.

We have such a tendency to lay a lot of labels, opinions, and judgments on top of what's happening. Steadfastness—loyalty to yourself—means that you let those

judgments go. So, in a way, part of the steadfastness is that when you notice your mind is going a million miles an hour and you're thinking about all kinds of things, there is this uncontrived moment that just happens without any effort: you stay with your experience. In meditation, you develop this nurturing quality of loyalty and steadfastness and perseverance toward yourself. And as we learn to do this in meditation, we become more able to persevere through all kinds of situations outside of our meditation, or what we call postmeditation.

Clear Seeing

The second quality that we generate in meditation is clear seeing, which is similar to steadfastness. Sometimes this is called clear awareness. Through meditation, we develop the ability to catch ourselves when we are spinning off, or hardening to circumstances and people, or somehow closing down to life. We start to catch the beginnings of a neurotic chain reaction that limits our ability to experience joy or connect with others. You would think that because we are sitting in meditation, so quiet and still, focusing on the breath, that we wouldn't notice very much. But it is actually quite the opposite. Through this development of steadfastness, this learning to stay in meditation, we begin to form a nonjudgmental, unbiased clarity of just seeing. Thoughts come, emotions come, and we can see them ever so clearly.

In meditation, you are moving closer and closer to yourself, and you begin to understand yourself so much more clearly. You begin to see clearly without a conceptual analysis, because with regular practice, you see what you do over and over and over and over again. You see that you replay the same tapes over and over and over in your mind. The name of the partner might be different, the employer might be different, but the themes are somewhat repetitious. Meditation helps us clearly see ourselves and the habitual patterns that limit our life. You begin to see your opinions clearly. You see your judgments. You see your defense mechanisms. Meditation deepens your understanding of yourself.

Courage

The third quality we cultivate in meditation is one that I've actually been alluding to when I bring up both steadfastness and clear seeing—and it happens when we

allow ourselves to sit in meditation with our emotional distress. I think it's really important to state this as a separate quality that we develop in practice, because when we experience emotional distress in meditation (and we will), we often feel like "we're doing it wrong." So the third quality that seems to organically develop within us is the cultivation of courage, the gradual arising of courage. I think the word "gradual" here is very important, because it can be a slow process. But over time, you will find yourself developing the courage to experience your emotional discomfort and the trials and tribulations of life.

Meditation is a transformative process, rather than a magic makeover in which we doggedly aim to change something about ourselves. The more we practice, the more we open and the more we develop courage in our life. In meditation you never really feel

that you "did it" or that you've "arrived." You feel that you just relaxed enough to experience what's always been within you. I sometimes call this transformative process "grace." Because when we're developing this courage, in which we allow the range of our emotions to occur, we can be struck with moments of insight. These insights could never have come from trying to figure out conceptually what's wrong with us or what's wrong with the world. These moments of insight come from the act of sitting in meditation, which takes courage—a courage that grows with time.

Through this developing courage, we are often graced with a change in our worldview, if ever so slight. Meditation allows you to see something fresh that you've never seen before or to understand something new that you've never understood before. Sometimes we call these boons of meditation "blessings." In meditation, you learn how to get out of your own way long enough for there to be room for your own wisdom to manifest, and this happens because you're not repressing this wisdom any longer.

When you develop the courage to experience your emotional distress at its most difficult level, and you're just sitting there with it in meditation, you realize how much comfort and how much security you get from your mental world. Because at that point, when there's a lot of emotion, you begin to really get in touch with

the feeling, the underlying energy, of your emotions. You begin to let go of the words, the stories, as best you can, and then you're just sitting there. Then you realize, even if it seems unpleasant, that you feel compelled to keep reliving the memory, the story of your emotions—or that you want to dissociate. You may find that you often drift into fantasy about something pleasant. And the secret is that, actually, we don't want to do any of this. Part of us wants so earnestly to wake up and open. The human species wants to feel more alive and awake to life. But also, the human species is not comfortable with the transient, shifting quality of the energy of reality. Simply put, a large part of us actually prefers the comfort of our mental fantasies and planning, and that's actually why this practice is so difficult to do. Experiencing our emotional distress and nurturing all of these qualities—steadfastness, clear seeing, courage—really shakes up our habitual patterns. Meditation loosens up our conditioning; it's loosening up the way we hold ourselves together, the way we perpetuate our suffering.

Attention

The fourth quality we develop in meditation is something I've been touching on all along, and that is the ability to become awake to our lives, to each and every moment, just as it is. This is the absolute essence of meditation. We develop attention to this very moment; we learn to just be here. And we have a lot of resistance to just being here! When I first started practicing, I thought I wasn't good at it. It took me a while to realize that I had a lot of resistance to just being here now. Just being here—attention to this very moment—does not provide us with any kind of certainty or predictability. But when we learn how to relax into the present moment, we learn how to relax with the unknown.

Life is never predictable. You can say, "Oh, I like the unpredictability," but that's usually true only up to a certain point, as long as the unpredictability is somewhat fun and adventurous. I have a lot of relatives who are into things like bungee jumping and all kinds of terrifying things—all of my nephews, particularly, and nieces. Sometimes, thinking of their activities, I experience extreme terror. But everybody, even my wild relatives, meets their edge. And sometimes the most adventurous of us meet our edge in the strangest places, like when we can't get a good cup of coffee. We're willing to jump off a bridge upside down, but we throw a tantrum when we can't get a good cup of coffee. Strange that not being able to

get a good cup of coffee could be the unknown, but somehow for some, maybe for you, it is that edge of stepping into that uncomfortable, uncertain space.

So this place of meeting our edge, of accepting the present moment and the unknown, is a very powerful place for those who wish to awaken and open their heart and mind. The present moment is the generative fire of our meditation. It is what propels us toward transformation. In other words, the present moment is the fuel for your personal journey. Meditation helps you meet your edge; it's where you actually come up against it and you start to lose it. Meeting the unknown of the moment allows you to live your life and to enter your relationships and commitments ever more fully. This is living wholeheartedly.

Meditation is revolutionary, because it's not a final resting place: you can always be more settled. This is why I continue to do this year after year. If I looked back and had no sense that any transformation had happened, if I didn't recognize that I feel more settled and more flexible, it would be pretty discouraging. But there is that feeling. And there's always another challenge, and that keeps us humble. Life knocks you off your pedestal. We can always work on meeting the unknown from a more settled and openhearted space. It happens for all of us. I too have moments where I am challenged in meeting the present moment, even after decades of meditation. Years back, I took a trip alone with my granddaughter, who was six years old at the time. It was such an embarrassing experience, because she was being extremely difficult. She was saying "no" about everything, and I kept losing it with this little angel whom I adore. So I said, "Okay, Alexandria, this is between you and Grandma, right? You're not going to tell anybody about what's going on? You know, all those pictures you've seen of Grandma on the front of books? Anyone you see carrying around one of those books, you do not tell them about this!"

The point is that when your cover is blown, it's embarrassing. When you practice meditation, getting your cover blown is just as embarrassing as it ever was, but you're glad to see where you're still stuck because you would like to die with no more big surprises. On your deathbed, when you thought you were Saint Whoever, you don't want to find out that the nurse completely pushes you over the wall with frustration and anger. Not only do you die angry at the nurse, but

you die disillusioned with your whole being. So if you ask why we meditate, I would say it's so we can become more flexible and tolerant to the present moment. You could be irritated with the nurse when you're dying and say, "You know, that's the way life is." You let it move through you. You can feel settled with that, and hopefully you even die laughing—it was just your luck to get this nurse! You can say, "This is absurd!" These people who blow our cover like this, we call them "gurus."

No Big Deal

The fifth and last quality regarding why we meditate is what I call "no big deal." It's what I am getting at when I say we become flexible to the present moment. Yes, with meditation you may experience profound insight, or the magnificent feeling of grace or blessing, or the feeling of transformation and newfound courage, but then: no big deal. You're on your deathbed, and you have this nurse who's driving you nuts, and it's funny: no big deal.

This was one of the biggest teachings from my teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: no big deal. I remember one time going to him with what I thought was a very powerful experience from my practice. I was all excited, and as I was telling him about this experience, he had a look. It was a kind of indescribable look, a very open look. You couldn't call it compassionate or judgmental or anything. And as I was telling him about this, he touched my hand and said, "No . . . big . . . deal." He wasn't saying "bad," and he wasn't saying "good." He was saying that these things happen and they can transform your life, but at the same time don't make too big a deal of them, because that leads to arrogance and pride, or a sense of specialness. On the other hand, making too big a deal about your difficulties takes you in the other direction; it takes you into poverty, self-denigration, and a low opinion of yourself. So meditation helps us cultivate this feeling of no big deal, not as a cynical statement, but as a statement of humor and flexibility. You've seen it all, and seeing it all allows you to love it all.

This teaching is from Pema Chödrön's new book, "How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind," published by Sounds True.



ABOUT PEMA CHÖDRÖN

With her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, Pema Chödrön is today's most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *The Places that Scare You*, and other important books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can be opportunities for awakening. Her book *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better: Wise Advice for Leaning into the Unknown* will be published in September, 2015. She serves as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey Monastery in Nova Scotia and is a student of Dzigar Kongtrul, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and the late Chögyam Trungpa. For more, visit pemachodronfoundation.org.