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COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY



108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

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Comfortable with Uncertainty

*108 Teachings on Cultivating
Fearlessness and Compassion*

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

*Compiled and edited by
Emily Hilburn Sell*



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*May all sentient beings enjoy happiness
and the root of happiness.*

*May we be free from suffering
and the root of suffering.*

*May we not be separated from the great
happiness devoid of suffering.*

*May we dwell in the great equanimity free
from passion, aggression, and prejudice.*

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

THIS BOOK CONTAINS 108 practical teachings gathered from the works of Pema Chödrön. They are 108 pith instructions on leading our lives in the spirit of mahayana Buddhism. *Mahayana* means the “greater vehicle,” the path that gradually leads us out of our cramped world of self-preoccupation into the greater world of fellowship with all human beings. The teachings selected here give a glimpse of the mahayana vision, a taste of the meditation practices it offers, and hints on carrying the vision and meditation into everyday life.

Pema draws from a long lineage of teachers and teachings. Her style is unique, but nothing she teaches is uniquely hers. Her teaching is particularly influenced by her own root guru, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Trungpa Rinpoche was one of the first Tibetans to present Buddhism to Westerners in English, combining the wisdom of the Kagyü and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism with that of the kingdom of Shambhala. Shambhala is a legendary enlightened society rooted in the view of basic goodness, the practice of meditation, and the activity of cultivating bodhichitta, the awakened

heart of loving-kindness and compassion. The story goes that the first king of Shambhala received teachings from the Buddha, practiced them, and passed them on to his subjects. Rinpoche called this secular meditative tradition “the sacred path of the warrior,” emphasizing the inherently awake quality (“basic goodness”) of ourselves and our surroundings. Meditation practice is how we discover basic goodness and learn to cultivate bodhichitta. With this view, practice, and activity, even the most mundane situation becomes a vehicle for awakening.

Because they are rooted in universal principles and everyday practicalities, these teachings have survived a long time—at least twenty-five hundred years. They are not dogmatic. Students are continually encouraged to test them and to experience their truth (dharma) for themselves. For this reason, these teachings are highly adaptable. They are able to speak in any language and to any culture. Pema Chödrön continues the Shambhala Buddhist tradition of Trungpa Rinpoche by bringing the ancient discipline of Buddhism and the warrior tradition of Shambhala into the modern-day culture and psyche.

In essence, these teachings tell us that by cultivating mindfulness and awareness, we can realize our inherent wealth and share it with others. This inner treasure is called bodhichitta. It is like a jewel buried deep within us—ours to unearth as soon as the conditions are ripe. Bodhichitta is often presented in two

aspects: absolute and relative. Absolute bodhichitta is our natural state, experienced as the basic goodness that links us to every other living being on the planet. It has many names: openness, ultimate truth, our true nature, soft spot, tender heart, or simply what *is*. It combines the qualities of compassion, unconditional openness, and keen intelligence. It is free from concepts, opinions, and dualistic notions of “self” and “other.”

Although absolute bodhichitta is our natural state, we are intimidated by its unconditional openness. Our heart feels so vulnerable and tender that we fabricate walls to protect it. It takes determined inner work even to see the walls, and a gentle approach to dismantling them. We don't have to tear them down all at once or “go at them with a sledgehammer,” as Pema puts it. Learning to rest in open-hearted basic goodness is a lifelong process. These teachings offer gentle and precise techniques to help us along the way.

Relative bodhichitta is the courage and compassion to investigate our tender heart, to stay with it as much as we can, and gradually to expand it. The key point of cultivating relative bodhichitta is to keep opening our hearts to suffering without shutting down. Slowly we learn to uncover the limitless qualities of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, and to extend them with others. To train in making our hearts this big takes bravery and kindness.

There are several practices that help us open our hearts to ourselves and to others. The most basic of these is sitting meditation, which allows us to become familiar with the groundlessness and spaciousness of our nature. Another key practice is mind training (*lojong* in Tibetan), our inheritance from the eleventh-century Buddhist master Atisha Dipankara. Mind training includes two elements: sending-and-taking practice (*tonglen* in Tibetan), in which we take in pain and send out pleasure, and slogan practice, in which we use pithy slogans to reverse our habitual attitude of self-absorption. These methods instruct us in using what might seem like our greatest obstacles—anger, resentment, fear, jealousy—as fuel for awakening.

In this book Pema teaches sitting meditation, *tonglen*, working with slogans, and the aspiration practices of the four limitless qualities as gateways to the awakened heart of *bodhichitta*. With a daily practice of sitting meditation, we become familiar with our natural openheartedness. We begin to stabilize and strengthen ourselves in it. Off the meditation cushion, in everyday life, we then begin to experiment with keeping our hearts open even in the face of unpleasant circumstances. With *tonglen* and slogan practice we start to taste the flavor of what we fear and move toward what we habitually avoid. To further stretch our limits and open our hearts, we practice expanding the four limitless qualities—loving-kindness

(*maitri* in Sanskrit), compassion, joy, and equanimity—by aspiring to extend them to others.

In addition, we can engage in particular activities (*paramitas* in Sanskrit) that take us beyond our strange human tendency to protect ourselves from the joy of our awakened heart. Pema calls these activities “the six ways of compassionate living”: generosity, patience, discipline, exertion, meditation, and *prajna*, or wisdom. The basis for all these practices is the cultivation of *maitri*, an unconditional loving-kindness with ourselves that says, “Start where you are.”

In Buddhist terms, this path is known as *bodhisattva* activity. Simply put, a *bodhisattva* is one who aspires to act from an awakened heart. In terms of the Shambhala teachings, it is the path of warriorship. To join these two streams, Pema likes to use the term warrior-*bodhisattva*, which implies a fresh and forward-moving energy that is willing to enter into suffering for others’ benefit. Such action relates to overcoming the self-deception, self-protection, and other habitual reactions that we use to keep ourselves secure—in a prison of concepts. By gently and precisely cutting through these barriers of ego, we develop a direct experience of *bodhichitta*.

What everyone on this path shares is the inspiration to rest in uncertainty—cheerfully. The root of suffering is resisting the certainty that no matter what the circumstances, uncertainty is all we truly

have. Pema's teachings encourage us to experiment with becoming comfortable with uncertainty, then see what happens. What we call uncertainty is actually the open quality of any given moment. When we can be present for this openness—as it is always present for us—we discover that our capacity to love and care for others is limitless.

For readers who have already received meditation instruction, the teachings in this book can serve as daily, weekly, or monthly reminders of key points on the path. For those who have not yet begun meditating, the book is intended as news you can use—not as a substitute for personal meditation instruction. The list of resources at the end of the book will help interested readers find a meditation instructor.

Thanks to Tingdzin Ötro, Tessa Pybus, Julia Sagebien, John and David Sell, Pema's transcribers, and the staff of Shambhala Publications—especially Eden Steinberg—for encouragement and support in this project. We are all grateful to Pema for embodying the path of a warrior-bodhisattva and for transmitting it in such an appropriate and timely way.

These 108 teachings are excerpted from longer discussions in Pema's previous books. In arranging them, I visualized them as a crystal bead with 108 facets, to be contemplated as you wish. May they be of measureless benefit.

EMILY HILBURN SELL

*Comfortable with
Uncertainty*

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The Love That Will Not Die

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all others behind. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

On the journey of the warrior-bodhisattva, the path goes down, not up, as if the mountain pointed toward the earth instead of the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward turbulence and doubt however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is our heart—our wounded,

softened heart. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die. This love is bodhichitta. It is gentle and warm; it is clear and sharp; it is open and spacious. The awakened heart of bodhichitta is the basic goodness of all beings.

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