The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times Study Guide

The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times by Pema Chödrön

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times, Pema Chodron provides her readers with a training guide to achieving a state of groundlessness in which all fear dissolves. The book consists of three parts: an introduction describing the prison of illusion and ego in which we are trapped, a training course on cultivating the four limitless qualities, and a concluding overview of the concept of groundlessness.

In the introduction, Chodron describes the prison of emotion that traps most people. The prison blinds us to the true nature of reality. Though it is an illusion, we end up clinging to it because it takes courage to confront the true nature of life. Bodhichitta, which Chodron describes as a soft spot of empathetic potential available to us at all times, filters through cracks in the prison, and will take us out of the prison if we are willing to stay with it.

Training in the four limitless qualities, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, allows us to remain outside the prison and abandon ego. By studying our reactions to situations, especially those that conjure up strong emotions, and by studying the near and far enemies of the four limitless qualities, we can begin to abide with our emotions, instead of acting them out or suppressing them. This training can take all our lives, but the more we engage the four limitless qualities, the less we find ourselves back in the prison of ego.

The ultimate goal, remaining outside of the prison, is called groundlessness, a state of existence free of preconception and prejudice. Groundlessness can be unsettling, because it involves casting ourselves adrift in the reality of the present, with no preconceptions to cling to. But training in groundlessness can lead us to a state of fearlessness, and there will be no place we will be scared to go.

Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1- Excellence of Bodhichitta

Chodron introduces the term bodhichitta by breaking it down into its two parts, chitta meaning mind, heart, or attitude, and bodhi meaning awake, enlightened, or completely open. Bodhichitta is the soft spot in any situation. It is our natural empathetic leaning that, if we can stay with it, will allow us to avoid the hardening of our hearts and minds. The Buddha described bodhichitta as always present, even at our lowest moments, a door, however small, that we can choose to open or keep opened.

There are two levels of bodhichitta, unconditional, or gut level bodhichitta, and relative bodhichitta. Training in both of these can make one a bodhisattva, an enlightened warrior. Chodron likens enlightenment and openness to being a warrior because it requires the ability to look unflinchingly at every aspect of existence. A warrior does not hide from any knowledge, and a warrior knows uncertainty cannot be avoided.

Chapter 2 - Tapping into the Spring

Ego is the prison we all sit inside. It separates us from others and, even though it is a prison, our fear of leaving it increases over time. If we examine the walls of the prison with flexibility and objectivity, we can see cracks through which bodhichitta flows.

There are three things which Chodron calls the Lords of Materialism. We build the prison walls out of them. The Lord of Form is about addiction to externals, even those that are seemingly benign. Addictions to sex and food fall into this category, but so does addiction to things like exercise, or performance, anything that leads the person to rely on external validation. The Lord of Speech causes people to use beliefs to give themselves the illusion of certainty. It can drive people to be crusaders but it can also blind them to the inherent uncertainty of life. The Lord of Mind haunts those who seek delusional states of mind, including those who abuse drugs, or devote themselves to obsessive love or hate.

Chapter 3 - The Facts of Life

According to the Buddha, there are three principle characteristics of human existence: impermanence, egolessness, and suffering or dissatisfaction. Even our body states are always changing. Even the mountains are not permanent, and no one escapes uncertainty. Self-importance, the opposite of egolessness, is unnatural and it leads to boredom with ourselves and with the world. Accepting that pain is inherent creates the conditions of happiness. In general, we suffer from three misunderstandings: we try to hold on to a world that is always moving, we think ourselves separate and fixed, and we mistake suffering for happiness. The last of these, Chodron identifies by the word samsara.

Analysis

Chodron's ultimate goal is to explain groundlessness, and how this dissolves our fear, but she starts at the beginning, introducing bodhichitta. She will show throughout the book how this versatile tool of human empathetic behavior can be used to awaken us to the traps of habitual suffering. The prison metaphor is an excellent description of the life of most humans, but Chodron emphasizes that even in our darkness moments, the prison always has cracks in it created by bodhichitta. The third chapter actually sets up the end of the book. Starting with Chapter Four, Chodron will jump back to explaining how we can break out of the prison described in Chapter Two.

Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 - Learning to Stay

Maitri is the acceptance of ourselves, including acceptance of our own pain and confusion. Consciously trying to fix faults in ourselves can lead to more suffering. The changing of bad habits for good must always be done with maitri. Sitting meditation helps us accomplish this by teaching us four qualities of maitri: steadfastness, clear seeing, experiencing our emotional distress, and attention to the present moment.

Meditation teaches us steadfastness because the physical act of meditation is demanding on the mind and the body. It is difficult for human beings to stay in the present, which meditation demands, because we define ourselves by our past and by our expectations for the future. It teaches us clear seeing because from it we learn to recognize our anxiety and anger. It helps us experience our emotional distress because if done properly, we cannot run from our emotions; in fact, wisdom is inherent in emotions. It teaches us attention to the present moment by letting us touch arising thoughts, then let them go.

Chapter 5 - Warrior Slogans

The lojong slogans or the slogans of Atisha can help us remember wisdom in emotional moments. Once the slogans resonate in the mind, they can allow one to stay with the emotion, not act it out. There are 59 lojong slogans, relating to all aspects of bodhisattva training.

One slogan is to "Train in the three difficulties." These are: acknowledging our neurosis as neurosis; doing something different, and aspiring to continue practicing this way. If you can catch your emotional reaction, drop the storyline, and stay with the emotion, you can learn to recognize destructive emotions and see how they connect you to those around you who experience the same.

Chapter 6 - Four Limitless Qualities

The four limitless qualities are: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Start practicing them with yourself first. Treat even your faults with the four limitless qualities. As you get better, widen your circle to family members, then to close friends. Eventually you should be practicing the four limitless qualities on strangers and even enemies.

Analysis

The introduction to maitri is important because in the following chapters the methods that Chodron introduces can actually be harmful if not done with maitri. The lojong slogans are reproduced in their entirety in the appendix of the book, and Chodron

makes little effort to explain more than a handful of them, leaving the investigation of the rest, some of them quite obscure, as an exercise for the reader. The four concepts briefly introduced in the sixth chapter will occupy the next major section of the book. These are the qualities that will lead out of the prison, and to the primary goal of the book, groundlessness.

Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 - Loving-kindness

Maitri involves placing our fearful mind in the cradle of loving-kindness. We practice this with ourselves first because without loving-kindness for ourselves, it is impossible for us to genuinely feel for others. Maitri is blocked by emotions like rage, which are often barriers we create to block out our true emotions, like fear. Learning to recognize when your true emotions are blocked by one of these barrier emotions is an important step.

There are seven stages to practicing maitri, radiating in circles of increasing size. Practice first on yourself, then on a loved-one, then on friends, then on neutral people, i.e., people we have no strong emotions for, good or bad, and then on enemies. Those are the first five. The sixth involves practice on the first five as a single, undivided group. In the seventh stage, practice on the whole universe.

Chapter 8 - Compassion

Practicing compassion is more emotionally challenging than loving-kindness because it involves the willingness to feel pain. Indeed, practicing compassion might involve imagining gruesome situations. As with loving-kindness, practice in the seven stages, radiating outward, starting with yourself. Compassion for enemies is particularly difficult, but imagining situations where they might feel pain can actually allow you to connect with them, because it illustrates that they, like you, can be hurt.

Chapter 9 - Tonglen

Tonglen, which literally means "sending and taking" in Tibetan, is the concept of exchanging oneself for others. The process is similar to breathing in oxygen from the air. You breathe in the suffering of those around you, remove the storyline, and then breathe out compassion. Formally, tonglen involves four stages: a brief moment of stillness or openness, working with the raw energy of claustrophobia and spaciousness, breathe in what is unwanted then breathe out relief, and extend compassion to include others with similar feelings.

Shunyata is "emptiness" or "openness," and it is the first stage of tonglen. Open to the energy of existence, especially the energy of calm, which creates space for the next stage. As you do so, visualize expansive things, skies, oceans. In the second stage, breathe in claustrophobia like smog into the vast space. Then breathe out fresh, light, and cool, while visualizing something clean like moonlight, a sparkling sun, or a rainbow. Breathing is done through all the pores, not just the mouth. On the final step, you can send anything you wish to others, including compassionate thoughts or even helpful objects.

Analysis

The concept of seven stage practice introduced in chapter seven is used repeatedly throughout the book to practice not only maitri, but loving-kindness, tonglen, joyfulness and others. This method of practicing an emotional or mental ability in ever widening circles is a mental exercise that is similar to the physical exercise of lifting weights. When you perform weight training, you gradual increase the amount of weight to increase your strength, just as you increase who you attempt to practice maitri, or compassion on to include even your enemies as your ability to cultivate unconditional compassion increases. The practice of tonglen also has a parallel to a physical act. When stretching or attempting to release tension in the body, it is said that you should breath in, imagining the breath to be entering the location of the tension. When you breathe out, you release the tension from the area. It leaves with the breath. This method of stretching physically is remarkably similar to the method of tonglen.

Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10 - Finding the Ability to Rejoice

Through long practice of the above methods we begin to experience joy free of clinging and craving. Our first joy is that the situation is workable. Chodron uses the metaphor of a garden, one where flowers are not yet growing, but where we are confident they will, despite the presence of rocks. Draw joy out of the easiest things first. Rejoice in your own good fortune, and be sure to watch for it, because you can miss it. Then rejoice in the good fortune of others. Be sure to take care when performing ordinary tasks, setting the table, gardening, preparing food. If you take care when performing these tasks, then they, too, will yield joy. Rejoice using the seventh stage method. Envy often blocks our ability to rejoice for others, especially our enemies. Watch for envy in yourself.

Chapter 11 - Enhancing the Training in Joy

Cultivate joy by cherishing and rejoicing in the pleasure you encounter, then wish it upon others. Do not feel guilty about enjoying pleasure. If good fortune smiles upon you, do not fail to enjoy it because of guilt that others were not as fortunate. Rejoice in your good fortune, and then wish it upon others.

When life is pleasant, enjoy it, and then think of others. When life is a burden, think of others. Chodron relates the story of a woman who used the morning commute as an exercise for creating empathetic awareness of all those around her.

Chapter 12 - Think Bigger

The first three boundless qualities train the mind to think bigger, and we can then grow in the fourth boundless quality, equanimity. Equanimity is like holding a banquet and inviting everyone, loved ones, friends, strangers, and enemies. Chodron tells the story of a zen master who, when asked each day by his students how he was, always replied that he was okay. Finally a student asked him how it was that he can always be okay. Does he not have bad days, hard times, illnesses? The zen master replied that he has good days and he has bad days. On bad days he is okay, on good days he is okay. That is equanimity.

There are eight variations on our tendency to hope or fear. They are four sets of paired emotions that chase each other around inside of us and obscure equanimity. The pairs are pleasure and pain, praise and blame, gain and loss, and fame and disgrace. When any of these is in ascendancy, contact the soft spot, the bodhichitta leaking through the cracks in the prison, and follow it to equanimity.

Analysis

Chodron's description of enlightenment bares no resemblance to indifference or austerity. A good example of this is her insistence that we not punish ourselves or feel guilty when we receive something from good fortune. After describing the final limitless quality, equanimity, Chodron boils down the metaphor of the prison by introducing the four pairs of emotions that chase themselves around inside us and obscure our view of bodhichitta. She stresses over and over again, throughout the book, that it is a mistake to attempt to suppress these emotions, or to try to pretend indifferently that they are not there. This leads to further blindness and from her repeated warnings against suppressing emotions it is clear that that is a common mistake in aspiring spiritual warriors.

Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13 - Meeting the Enemy

It takes bravery to confront self-deception. We call carry bags around with us, filled with our fears and insecurities. A warrior is brave enough to set the bags down, open them up, and go through them, removing those things that weigh him or her down.

Cultivating the four limitless qualities can be tricky. You must watch for the near and far enemies of each. The near enemy is similar to the quality, but it actually limits you. The far enemy is the opposite of the quality.

The near enemy of loving-kindness is represented by the Tibetan word lhenchak, which means attachment. Lhenchak is strong in relationships with those dearest to us, but loving-kindness is stronger than lhenchak because loving-kindness is not based on need. Relationships based on lhenchak can turn into irritation and blindness. Hatred is the far enemy of loving-kindness. Hatred isolates us, and strengthens the illusion of separation.

The three near enemies of compassion are pity, overwhelm, and idiot compassion. Pity comes from separation, from seeing yourself as a helper of the helpless and not really feeling another's pain. Pity is easy to identify for those that are the target of pity, because they can feel the distance, the separation that the person who pities them places between. Overwhelm is a helpless state brought on by the contemplation of too much suffering. It inhibits compassion. Idiot compassion involves being kind when we should say no. This often relates to those who remain in aggressive, violent relationships. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, and it stems from fear. Cruelty when rationalized or unacknowledged destroys us.

The near enemy of joyfulness is overexcitement. It occurs when we mistake a manic state for being truly at peace with the world, and it separates us from those around us. The far enemy of joyfulness is envy.

The near enemy of equanimity is detachment or indifference. Equanimity requires dwelling in powerful emotions at times; it is not the suppression of emotional states. The far enemy of equanimity is prejudice. Prejudice often results from attempting to avoid the inherent uncertainty of life. Those that are prejudice often have clear ideas about what is right and wrong and see enemies all around them.

All of these enemies, near and far, are excellent teachers, if we can learn to watch for them.

Chapter 14 - Fresh Start

Do not dwell on the mistakes or transgressions of the past. Progress does not involve punishing yourself for the mistakes you make. Stay in the moment. If, when watching yourself, you recognize one of the near or far enemies, observe it, drop the storyline, and let it go. Do not punish yourself afterward for having the emotion.

Chapter 15 - Strength

The five strengths are strong determination, familiarization, the seed of goodness, reproach, and aspiration. Strong determination involves using discomfort as an opportunity, not simply trying to make it disappear. Learn from the enemies. Familiarization involves taking the teachings to heart. Learn the techniques that encourage the four qualities, and memorize the lojong slogans so that they resonate in the mind. The seed of goodness involves connecting with the soft spot, with bodhichitta, to realize our basic goodness. Water the seed with gentleness and honesty, and by thinking of others. Reproach must be performed with maitri, or loving acceptance. If performed with maitri, reproach can steer us away from destructive habits. Reproach is not about disciplining ourselves for our mistakes; it is simply about recognizing what brings suffering.

Analysis

Chapter 13 is perhaps the most extensive in the book. It details near and far enemies for all four limitless qualities, and thus has to cover eight concepts. Each of these reappears again and again in the rest of the book, always in the context of being great teachers. Chodron seems to be a firm believer in the idea of using discomfort or emotional turmoil to train the mind. She says several times that powerful emotional states are great teachers, and that it may even be good to go so far as to imagine terrible things occurring to ourselves or our loved ones, so we may watch ourselves in these emotional states, and learn from these great teachers. The next few chapters detail some of the hurdles encountered when trying to cultivate the four limitless qualities. This seems to be a large portion of the training the book relates. Chodron implies that the training of the four limitless qualities never really ends.

Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16 - Three Kinds of Laziness

Laziness inhibits our wakeful energy. There are three kinds of laziness: comfort orientation, loss of heart, and "couldn't care less." Comfort orientation comes from avoiding inconvenience. It causes us to lose touch with the texture of life and always seek stasis. Loss of heart comes when we forget how to help ourselves and we become mired in a "poor me" world view. "Couldn't care less" is similar to loss of heart, except there is no soft spot of vulnerability for us to hold on to. It is more aggressive and deeper rooted than loss of heart.

There are three methods humans use for relating to laziness: attacking, indulging, or ignoring. Those that attack condemn themselves for their laziness and wallow in guilt. Those that indulge in their laziness justify and even applaud it. Those that ignore their laziness disassociate themselves from reality and from the naked truth. If we can remain conscious of our states of emotions, and, when it arises, not let laziness take us into one of these three states, then we can become inquisitive about it. We realize that we suffer because of it, and it will usually lessen or disappear.

Chapter 17 - Bodhisattva Activity

Bodhisattvas, or spiritual warriors, train in six ways of compassionate living: generosity, discipline, patience, enthusiasm, meditation, and prajna or unconditional wisdom. These six things are known as paramitas, a word meaning "gone to the other shore." The near shore is where we are when we cling to predictability and ego. The far shore is freedom from dualism. Prajnaparamita is the key to the other five. It is unconditional bodhichitta, founded on mindfulness and open inquiry.

Generosity requires us to let go of ourselves and helps us to stop clinging. Discipline requires us to not cause harm and helps us see our rigidity. Patience training begins with the self first, and it allows us to see and understand our agitation. Enthusiasm is connected with joy. Paramitas are not a rigid code of ethics but are meant to challenge our habitual reactions. Practice them while keeping in mind the three-fold purity: no big deal about the doer, no big deal about the action, no big deal about the result.

Chapter 18 - Groundlessness

The Buddha gathered his students together at Vulture Peak Mountain. There he told them that true groundlessness requires that we let go of all of our ideas, even his teachings, for any description of reality was a trap. Holding on to anything blocks wisdom. He taught the paradox "emptiness is form, form is emptiness." This is prajnaparamita, unconditional wisdom, and it is the inexpressible nature of human experience. Form is empty, without barriers. But emptiness is also form. To experience

emptiness is simply to be fully awake and alive, experiencing existence without any preconceptions. When we understand that there is no answer and we stop seeking even the satisfaction of finding one, we recognize the formlessness of existence, and fear disappears.

Analysis

The chapter on laziness is the last of the material involving cultivation of the four limitless qualities. Chodron now picks up on the final conceptual section of the book, which actually received a brief introduction in chapter three. Cultivation of the four limitless qualities has hopefully lead to the dissolution of the prison of confusion, but once outside that prison we still cling to ideas, even if only the spiritual ideas that granted us freedom. The chapter relating the Vulture Peak Mountain teachings is the second most extensive chapter, after the chapter on lhenchak. It is also easily the most difficult to follow. This is somewhat understandable, as Chodron is seeking to relate something that the Buddha said was inexpressible. What she settles for is a kind of approximation that we can try to understand, but she makes it clear that groundlessness is not a knowledge; it is an experience.

Chapters 19-22

Chapters 19-22 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 19 - Heightened Neurosis

Moving toward groundlessness does not feel liberating. Rather, most experience a sense of insecurity because we are threatening to cast off from all of the things to which we cling. This often brings a state of increased clinging which is called heightened neurosis. Heightened neurosis can occur even inside of our practices to become bodhisattvas. While practicing to become groundless, we will fall into scenarios related to our training. We could become self-critical of our progress. We could develop a feeling of superiority about ourselves and what we are trying to do. We could even develop a tendency to use spiritual practice to avoid powerful emotions or truths. We bring these old habits of security right into our practice. It takes time to gain confidence as we decrease our handholds. We are leaving behind solidity, and it is natural at first to incessantly reach back for a handhold. Ironically, dread or discomfort might be a good sign that we are releasing from our comforting illusions and entering into compassionate inquiry about our ego prison.

Chapter 20 - When the Going Gets Rough

The most simple method to awaken bodhichitta is to practice not causing harm to anyone—ourselves and others—everyday and to do what we can to be helpful. This is exceedingly difficult, but when the going gets rough, there are four methods to help us out: not setting up the target for the arrow, connecting with the heart, seeing obstacles as teachers, and regarding all that occurs as a dream.

When we act out or suppress anger, we escalate our own aggression along with those around us, and we set ourselves up as targets for further aggression. We can take down the target by staying with anger or fear, but not acting it out. Connecting with the heart allows us to empathize with those acting out of anger or fear, and dispels the illusion that we are separate from them, and that they are the enemy. If we can connect with the heart, then the bully or the irritating neighbor can be our teachers. If any of this leads to our becoming too serious or tense, then we should remember to regard what occurs as a dream. When we awaken from a dream, we know that the enemies in it were not real, and the fear we felt in the dream dissolves.

Chapter 21 - The Spiritual Friend

Taking on a teacher is a wise move in our spiritual development, but we must be able to trust in the teacher which can take time. Pema Chodon was drawn to her teacher Rinpoche Trungpa because he was unflappable, and she could not manipulate him. Still, she writes that it took years for her to develop an unconditional trusting relationship with her teacher. The teacher's role is to make the student realize that both of their

awakened minds are the same mind. This often makes the student mistrust the teacher because anything that moves us closer to egolessness seems threatening. But opening up to a teacher is a smaller parallel of opening up to all existence. A good teacher is a mirror that shows our mind with embarrassing accuracy.

Chapter 22 - The In-Between State

The goal of groundlessness is long term, and many will find themselves in an in-between state which is uncomfortable. This can be manifested by a don't-know-what-to-do feeling because while we have learned that our old comforts bring suffering, we are not yet comfortable with emptiness. The challenge for the spiritual warrior is to be able to remain in the in-between state without struggle or complaint, to avoid reaching back to habitual patterns. If we are capable of braving this awkward state, compassion will arise. The in-between state is a crossroads and a very productive place in which we can train.

Analysis

Compared to the initial chapters on groundlessness, the chapters on heightened neurosis and on when the going gets rough are straightforward and conceptually easy to understand. The metaphor Chodron uses to invoke the idea of groundlessness, that of casting off from shore and experiencing life adrift, is brought into sharp focus by the further metaphor of reaching back to grab something, anything, to hold on to.

Chapter 20 seems perhaps the most practical and useful of the whole book, and its methods for dissolving anger are explicit compared to some of the obscurity of the methods in the previous chapters.

Characters

Pema Chodron

Pema Chodron was born in New York City in 1936. She graduated from the University of California and began a career as a school teacher before converting to Buddhism. She became an ordained Buddhist nun in 1974. At the same time, in the early 1970s, she began studying with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Trungpa tulku and Buddhism master scholar. She studied with him until his early death, in 1987. In the 1980s, she worked as the director of the Boulder Shambhala Center in Colorado, and then as the director of Gampo Abbey, in Nova Scotia, where she is a resident teacher to this day. She began publishing books on Buddhism in the late 1980s and has been a prolific author since. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's son, appointed her acharya, or senior teacher after his father's death.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Chogyam Trungpa was born in 1939 and died of heart failure in 1987, at the age of 48. Chogyam Trungpa was the eleventh in the line of Trungpa tulkus, a lineage of the Kagyu school, one of the principle schools of Tibetan Buddhism. At a young age, he was deeply schooled in Kagyu meditation and scholarship. After his exile from Tibet, he studied at Oxford and formed the first Tibetan monastery in the west, in Scotland in 1967. In 1970, he moved to the United States, where, after a car accident that left him partially paralyzed, he decided to give up his monastic vows and work as a teacher. He began a controversial career as a lay teacher. He became fond of alcohol and often behaved in what many regarded as uncouth or outright shocking ways. He successfully spread his message of radical compassion, establishing many Shambhala Meditation Centers around the world, and taking as students many famous writers, performers, and poets. In the 1980s, his health began to fail, perhaps because of his continued predilection toward alcohol.

Buddha

Gautama Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. His times of birth and death are still a matter of scholarship, but most place his birth at or around 500 BCE. A prince born into a life of luxury, the Buddha broke from the material life surrounding him and began teaching about the Middle Way, a path between indulgence and pious austerity that he believe could lead to true enlightenment. All major schools of Buddhism cite the Buddha as the principle figure in their faith, and his eventual achievement of nirvana, a state of bliss associated with infinite compassion, is the ultimate goal of the Buddhist practitioner.

Bodhisattva

A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being or enlightened warrior who, though he is capable, refrains from entering nirvana in order to help others around him achieve enlightenment. The Bodhisattva follows the example of the Buddha, who after achieving enlightenment, refrained from entering into nirvana until his death, so that he could help others achieve what he had.

Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana

Atisha was a Buddhist teacher, born sometime around the 1st millennium CE. He was a prolific writer and scholar as well as a teacher of Buddhism. Today he is closely associated with the lojong slogans, or the slogans of Atisha, which he translated from the Hindi and brought into Tibet.

Geshe Chekawa

Geshe Chekawa was a teacher and scholar from the 11th century CE who continued Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana's work of translating and bringing ancient Buddhism texts into Tibet.

Loved-Ones

Loved-ones are the second step in the sevenfold practice of tonglen. The second step is perhaps the easiest, maybe even easier than the first, because many people are able to love their children or their spouse, even if they cannot love themselves.

Friends

Friends are the third step in the sevenfold practice of tonglen. These are people who brighten our lives and thus spark few, if any, powerful negative emotions.

Indifferents

Indifferents are the fourth step in the sevenfold practice of tonglen. These are people we simply do not know. Pema Chodron suggests using someone that you encounter during the day who evokes no negative or positive emotions in you. She also calls Indifferents "neutrals."

Enemies

The fifth step in the seven-fold practice of tonglen is to practice on enemies. These are people who spark powerful negative emotions such as hate, jealousy, envy, or fear. This is theoretically the hardest step in the tonglen process, so it is undertaken after the easier steps of self, loved-ones, friends, and indifferents.

Objects/Places

Bodhichitta

Bodhichitta is the combination of two words, chitta, which roughly translates as mind, heart, or attitude, and bodhi, which means awake, enlightened, or completely open. Bodhichitta is the soft spot of empathetic potential that at any moment can point us in the direction of compassionate understanding.

Maitri

Mairti is the compassionate acceptance of who we are, including our faults and flaws.

Lojong slogan, the slogans of Atisha

A list of slogans brought into Tibet from India in the eleventh century by Atisha Dipankara and which can aid in accessing bodhichitta and the four limitless qualities.

The Four Limitless Qualities

Loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. The four limitless qualities, when practiced regularly can free one from the prison of ego and the cycle of aggression.

Tonglen

Tonglen is a method for empathizing with those around us by breathing in pain or destructive emotions and breathing out relief.

Lhenchak

A Tibetan word meaning attachment; it is the near enemy of loving-kindness and is akin to obsession or codependency.

Bodhisattva

Literally "an enlightened warrior."

Negative Test

A negative test is anything that you can bring to mind that will expose you to powerful negative emotions. You may use real events or imagined, anything to generate powerful emotions so that you may study your reaction. Chodron even suggests going so far as to imagine the death of a loved one.

Nirvana

Nirvana is a state of bliss attained through the relinquishing of the self. It was first attained by Gautama Buddha and is one of the goals of the practicing Buddhist.

Teacher-Student trust

The trust between a teacher and a student is not likely to occur instantaneously. Chodron says that it took years to develop trust with her teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, and she said that it is quite possible that the trust may never develop. The relationship must be two-way, with the teacher learning from the student as well.

Themes

The Prison of Ego or Dualism

To describe the state of existence in which most human live out their entire lives, Chodron creates the metaphor of a prison cell, the walls of which are built from out illusions about reality. We build these illusory walls with the help of the three Lords of Materialism. The Lord of Form is addiction to externals and often can be recognized as the concept of indulging in instant pleasure while sacrificing long-term happiness. Addictions, even those we might feel benign, fall into this category.

The Lord of Speech tricks us by instilling in us the illusion of certainty. Existence is in a constant state of flux, and clinging to an illusion of certainty is one of the principle ways of suppressing this perhaps unsettling knowledge. Many religious and political structures are based on the Lord of Speech.

The Lord of Mind tricks us into distorting our physical perception of the world to cope with what we may perceive as the horrors of the true mundane world. The prison of illusory beliefs created by one or more of these concepts traps us in an illusion of certainty and separates us from those around us. This illusion of ego, this concept of separation, tricks us into believing we are independent of the world, and by doing so, forces us to suppress what we experience, for what we experience would seem to indicate that we are not in fact separate.

The Three Principle Characteristics of Existence

Chodron draws on the teachings of the Buddha throughout the book. One of the key concepts from these teaching is the three principle characteristics of existence. They are impermanence, egolessness, and suffering or dissatisfaction.

Two of these, impermanence and egolessness are perhaps more difficult to understand for western minds than for eastern minds. Both Zen Buddhism and Taoism have incorporated the concept of change and impermanence for thousands of years. Taoism teaches that what does not change dies. This is an especially difficult idea for modern man, whose life is serialized and codified by uniformity in education, career, and even religion. But the Buddha says that we suffer when we try to hold onto a world that moves.

Egolessness, which is a rejection of dualism, is also a concept that may seem foreign to a western mind. Indeed, in the west we are told from a young age that we are all individual. Moreover, our social structure is based upon competition, which further emphasizes the illusion of separation because we are told that those around us that do not succeed do so because they did not do what was necessary to achieve. In the western religions, personal responsibility is greatly emphasized, and the very eastern concept that we all share our existence with those around us is uncomfortable.

The Buddha says, ironically, that one of the easiest ways for us to increase our suffering is to attempt to deny the suffering. Accepting that pain is inherent in life creates the condition for happiness because we free ourselves from all of the questions that arise when we mistakenly believe there must be a reason we are suffering.

Tonglen

Tonglen, a word that means "sending and taking" in Tibetan, is a method for exchanging ourselves with others. It goes hand in hand with bodhichitta because when we observe the suffering or misbehavior of others, we must first contact the soft spot, bodhichitta, and empathize with the person in order to experience tonglen. Chodron describes tonglen as a process akin to respiration, only in reverse. In respiration, we take fresh oxygen into our lungs, which we use to sustain our cells, and then expel waste, carbon dioxide. In tonglen, we "breathe" in what is negative, whether it is pain, misery, or destructive behavior. Then we use what we have breathed in. If we breathe in pain, we examine it, empathize with it. We then breathe out relief, either for us or others.

To aid in this process, Chodron tells us to first create shunyata, an expansive emptiness into which we will breathe in the pain or misery. She tells us to imagine this as smog that we breathe in. We then purify it, imagining something clean like moonlight sparkling on water or a sparkling sun. We can breathe out anything, a statement, a hope, an aspiration, even an object. For instance, if we observe someone in pain from a rash, we could actually imagine them receiving cortisone when we breathe out. Unlike physical respiration, Chodron tells us to imagine tonglen as breathing that is taking place through every pore in our body, not just our mouth and nose.

Style

Perspective

Pema Chodron is a woman of some age and she often relates the material as an elder teacher would relate to a student. But her manner of writing is warm and at times personal, which tends to diffuse the awkwardness that her pedagogical style can sometimes generate. She sticks mostly to conceptual teaching, and when she highlights her instruction with personal stories she is quite brief, usually relating a practical moment that occurred in her own life or the life of a student in one or two paragraphs.

This style keeps the book from being anecdotal, as does her tendency to create lists. The book is filled with enumerated concepts, and while this systemization can be off-putting it helps to ground the material, which is often broad and conceptual. The spiritual concepts in the book are broad and not limiting. There is very little material that Chodron presents in a dogmatic way.

Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun and a longtime student of Chogyam Trungpa. She does not drown her reader in quotations from Buddhist texts but still manages to convey a sense of extensive learning. Moreover, her passion for the material is evident and contagious, and it is quite clear she is relating concepts to which she has devoted her life.

Tone

The book is written in a pedagogical style, and is addressed to all of humanity, including the author. She therefore uses the collective pronoun in her teachings. This gives the book a sense of a journey that "we" are taking together and underlines one of her central thrusts, that the concept of separate egos is flawed. She makes the training something that we all must do together as we read the book.

This is not a good introductory book to Buddhism, and in some places it might be difficult to follow for readers who have previously read no eastern spiritual literature. Chodron's tone is precise and energetic. Certain statements may have playfulness to them, but in general the tone is serious, though instructional, not grave. She frequently uses enumerated lists to present concepts. This gives the writing a formal, almost academic feel, and the vocabulary is on par with that of a college level text. In general, the presentation is straightforward and easily intuited, but there are section, particularly in the final section, where she attempts to describe groundlessness, where the text may require several readings to properly absorb.

Structure

Though there are several intervening chapter that present side concepts or extra material, the book is in general divided into three sections. The first five chapters introduce the key concept of the prison of ego, and the tools of bodhichitta, lojong slogans, and maitri. The bulk of the middle of the book is taken up with a description of the four limitless qualities, each with its own chapter. Then follows several chapters on the teachers that can be used to enhance these qualities, including the most extensive chapter in the book, which enumerates the near and far enemies of the four limitless qualities.

The last section of the book is the most obscure, especially for readers who have never before studied eastern spirituality. Here Chodron attempts to describe the concept of groundlessness and how it can lead to a state of fear, but her description of this central concept is difficult to follow in places. Admittedly, she describes the concept as inexpressible and must therefore resort to an approximation.

The chapters are thematic and short, usually containing information on a single concept, and have the feel of mini-lectures.

Quotes

"This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces through our indifference. This continual ache of the heart is a blessing that when accepted fully can be shared with all."
p. 4

"Even though peak experiences might show us the truth and inform us about why we are training, they are essentially no big deal. If we can't integrate them into the ups and downs of our lives, if we cling to them, they will hinder us."
p. 15

"That we take ourselves to seriously, that we are so absurdly important in our own minds, is a problem for us. We feel justified in being annoyed with everything. We feel justified in denigrating ourselves of in feeling that we are more clever than other people. Self-importance hurts us, limiting us to the narrow world of our likes and dislikes. We end up bored to death with ourselves and our world. We end up never satisfied."
p. 19

"Transformation occurs only when we remember, breath by breath, year after year, to move toward our emotional distress without condemning or justifying our experience."
p. 28

"The pith of the slogan practice is to take a warrior's attitude toward discomfort. It encourages us to ask, 'How can I practice right now, right on this painful spot, and transform this into the path of awakening?'"
p. 32-33

"We are a poignant mixture of something that isn't all that beautiful and yet is dearly love. Whether this is our attitude toward ourselves or toward others, it is the key to learning how to love."
p. 42

"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity."
p. 50

"The ordinariness of our good fortune can make it hard to catch."
p. 62

"In a nutshell, when life is pleasant, think of others. When life is a burden, think of others. If this is the only training we ever remember to do, it will benefit us tremendously and everyone else as well. It's a way of bringing whatever we encounter onto the path of

awakening bodhichitta."
p. 68

"Equanimity is bigger than our usual limited perspective. That we hope to get what we want and fear losing what we have—this describes our habitual predicament."
p. 70

"Cruelty when rationalized or unacknowledged destroys us."
p. 79

"Forgiveness, it seems, cannot be forced. When we are brave enough to open our hearts to ourselves, however, forgiveness will emerge."
p. 82

"The point of reproach is to develop enough self-respect that when we catch ourselves getting hooked in familiar ways we can stop. We aren't disciplining our badness; we're simply getting smart about what brings suffering and what brings happiness. We're finally giving ourselves a break."
p. 87

"It's important to recognize that we don't usually want to investigate laziness or any other habit. We want to indulge or ignore or condemn. We want to continue with the three futile strategies because we associate them with relief."
p. 91

"It is with this unfixated mind of prajna that we practice generosity, discipline, enthusiasm, patience, and meditation, moving from narrow-mindedness to flexibility and fearlessness."
p. 94

"Moving closer to someone who is so dangerous to the ego takes time."
p. 114

Topics for Discussion

What is the prison of the ego? How do the Lords of Form contribute to it creation? Discuss how bodhichitta gets into the prison.

Discuss the three principle characteristics of human existence? What misunderstanding lead us to conclude that these are not valid?

What are the four limitless qualities? What are some methods for cultivating them?

What are the near and far enemies of loving-kindness? Of compassion? Of joy? Of equanimity? How does knowledge of these near and far enemies help us to enhance the four limitless qualities?

What are the eight variations on the tendency to hope and fear and how do they inhibit equanimity?

Describe the concept of lhenchak. How does this near enemy of loving-kindness trick us? Describe some real life situations that might apply.

Discuss the concept of forgiveness. How does it relate to the theme of Chapter 14? In what important ways does it differ?

Enumerate the five strength and describe how they can help the spiritual warrior to practice the four limitless qualities.

What are the three forms of laziness and how can they be overcome?

Discuss the concept of groundlessness in detail. How can the statement "Form is empty, emptiness is form" be valid? How does groundlessness destroy fear?