

THE BIG IDEAS

Compassionately
Interrupting habits.

Mouse Traps
And suffering.

Grudges
And rat poisoning.

Practice Rejoicing
In our good fortune.

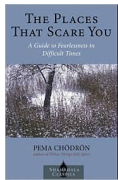
Pouring Cement
On the garden.

Enemies:
Near and far.

Pity:
An enemy of compassion.

Idiot Compassion:
Pema-style.

All Is Fleeting
And impermanent.



The Places That Scare You

A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times

BY PEMA CHÖDRÖN · SHAMBHALA © 2002 · 160 PAGES

“We can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.”

~ Pema Chödrön from *The Places That Scare You*

[Pema Chödrön](#) is a beautiful American Buddhist monk who gives us a Buddhist “guide to fearlessness in difficult times” in her simple, powerful book [The Places That Scare You](#).

There are a lot of Big Ideas in this short book, so let’s get on it! :)

COMPASSIONATELY INTERRUPTING HABITS

“The fear habit, the anger habit, the self-pity habit—all are strengthened and empowered when we continue to buy into them. The most compassionate thing we can do is to interrupt these habits.”

Amen.

I like [Tolle](#)’s mojo on this as well. He says: “*Watch out for any sign of unhappiness in yourself, in whatever form—it may be the awakening of the pain-body. This can take the form of irritation, impatience, a somber mood, a desire to hurt, anger, rage, depression, a need to have some drama in your relationship, and so on. Catch it the moment it awakens from its dormant state.*”

Pema also says: “Ordinarily we are swept away by habitual momentum and don’t interrupt our patterns even slightly. When we feel betrayed or disappointed, does it occur to us to practice? Usually not. But right there, in the midst of our confusion...” is where we can gain the most from our practice.

She continues: “Acknowledging that we are all churned up is the first and most difficult step in any practice. Without compassionate recognition that we are stuck, it’s impossible to liberate ourselves from confusion. ‘Doing something different’ is anything that interrupts our ancient habit of indulging in our emotions. We do anything to cut the strong tendency to spin out... Anything that’s non-habitual will do—even sing and dance or run around the block. We do anything that doesn’t reinforce our crippling habits. The third most difficult practice is to then remember that this is not something we do just once or twice. Interrupting our destructive habits and awakening our heart is the work of a lifetime.”

Here’s to being compassionate warriors and interrupting these habits!!! :)

MOUSE TRAPS AND SUFFERING

“A traditional analogy for the pain caused by the lord of form is of a mouse being caught in a trap because it can’t resist eating the cheese. The Dalai Lama offers an interesting twist to this analogy. He says that when he was a boy in Tibet he used to try to catch the mice, not because he wished to kill them, but because he wanted to outsmart them. He says that the mice in Tibet must be more clever than ordinary mice because he never succeeded in catching one. Instead they became his

“It’s up to us. We can spend our lives cultivating resentments and cravings or we can explore the path of the warrior-nurturing open-mindedness and courage.”

~ Pema Chödrön

"Peace between countries must rest on the solid foundation of love between individuals."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

models of enlightened conduct. He felt that, unlike most of us, they had figured out that the best thing they could do for themselves was to refrain from the short-term pleasure of cheese in order to have the long-term pleasure of living. He encouraged us to follow their example."

What a great story!

Imagine that: A mouse that's smart enough to see that eating the cheese will lead to the end of its life and then deciding not to nibble!

What cheese are you nibbling on right before the snap of the trap comes down and suffering begins?

Can you see that the harsh words or anger or criticism or gossip or the zoning out in front of the TV or the extra hour online or the extra glass of wine or couple beers are all just cheese sitting in a trap waiting for you to snatch it so suffering can getcha?!?

The first step in changing our behavior is always awareness of the behavior that's causing suffering, so let's make it official.

Here are my 5 Favorite Cheeses:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Alrighty.

Now that we've got the top temptations identified, let's see if we can become more aware of moments when we're tempted to snatch the cheese and NOT DO IT!!!

All this reminds me of some of my favorite Dalai Lama wisdom. He says: *"One begins identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors which lead to suffering. Having done this, one then sets about gradually eliminating those factors which lead to suffering and cultivating those which lead to happiness. That is the way."*

There ya go.

That is *definitely* the way, eh? :)

While we're on the subject of rodents, how about some rat poisoning?

GRUDGES AND RAT POISONING

"We'd be wise to question why we hold a grudge as if it were going to make us happy and ease our pain. It's rather like eating rat poison and thinking the rat will die. Our desire for relief and the methods we use to achieve it are definitely not in sync."

That's another great image, eh?!?

You holding a grudge?

You DO realize that's about as smart as eating rat poison and thinking the rat will die, right?

Seriously though. It's *that* backwards. :)

A MUCH better solution would be to have compassion for the other individual, to realize that we're all just pilgrims on the quest to discover our highest selves and offer ourselves and others a hug and a smile when we're not quite living up to the standards we aspire to.

But a grudge? Not such a good idea.

"Difficult people are, as usual, the greatest teachers."

~ Pema Chödrön

Next time you're feeling the urge to hold a grudge, go to the store and look at a box of rat poisoning on the shelf and commit to no longer consuming the lethal stuff!!

PRACTICE REJOICING IN OUR GOOD FORTUNE

"We can practice the first step of the aspiration by learning to rejoice in our own good fortune. We can train in rejoicing in even the smallest blessings our life holds. It is easy to miss our own good fortune; often happiness comes in ways we don't even notice. It's like a cartoon I saw of an astonished-looking man saying, 'What was that?' The caption below read, 'Bob experiences a moment of well-being.' The ordinariness of our good fortune can make it hard to catch."

Love that.

Reminds me of a section in [Marci Shimoff's](#) great book *Happy for No Reason* (see Notes) where she provides us with an inspiring look at some of the recent and powerful findings in Positive Psychology.

In the book Marci talks about the fact that we all have what psychologists call a "happiness set point" that's about 40% genetic, 10% circumstantial (like our wealth and marital status) and 50% within our control. Researchers have discovered that even if someone experiences great gains or losses they tend to wind up at the same happiness set point.

For example, after about a year, a lottery winner will lose her buzz and go back to the same level of happiness AND, after the same period, a person who loses his legs will come out of the despair and back to the same basic level of happiness.

Remarkable, eh?

The cool thing is we can raise our happiness levels through practices like what [Pema](#) recommends here: to "incline our minds to joy." In essence, to practice LOOKING for things to celebrate. The warm water in our shower, the smooth ride on a freeway, the abundant food in a grocery store or at a farmer's market.

Our life is FULL of blessings and we want to develop the practice of seeing the beauty. As we do this, we literally train our subconscious minds to find more amazing stuff for us.

It's kinda like when we go out and buy a car. Ever wonder why suddenly you see your make/model/color car EVERYWHERE you look?

Obviously, those cars were *always* there, but you didn't see them until you'd thought about it enough times that your subconscious mind (technically, your reticular activating system (or RAS) which is responsible for filtering the trillions of stimuli that constantly bombard us) thought it must be important to you and started showing you all of them on the road!

The SAME THING happens when we incline our mind to joy. OR, for that matter, when we incline our mind to pain.

If we're ALWAYS complaining the world's evil and people are cruel, guess what? Our subconscious mind will filter our experiences and serve up all kinds of examples of evil and cruelty.

If, on the other hand, we incline our mind to joy and celebrate all the little things that are going well in our lives, our RAS will feed up more and more examples of things to celebrate.

Powerful stuff.

So... What can YOU celebrate today?!?

And, how about a look at the opposite of inclining our mind to joy?

"By becoming intimate with how we close down and how we open up, we awaken our unlimited potential."

~ Pema Chödrön

"The best way to serve ourselves is to love and care for others."

~ Pema Chödrön

POURING CEMENT ON THE GARDEN

"This is the path we take in cultivating joy: learning not to armor our basic goodness, learning to appreciate what we have. Most of the time we don't do this. Rather than appreciate where we are, we continually struggle to nurture our dissatisfaction. It's like trying to get flowers to grow by pouring cement on the garden."

Hah. "Pouring cement on the garden."

Well, that's one way to make sure our flowers don't grow, eh!?!?

Are YOU constantly thinking about the things that aren't going the way you want?

(Hint: if you make a habit of blaming, criticizing, and complaining you proly are. :)

If so, stop that!

In *The Diamond Cutter* (see Notes), a great book all about applying the wisdom of the ancient Tibetan Buddhist sutra by the same name, [Geshe Michael Roache](#) talks about the importance of getting rid of what he calls "useless talk." Specifically, blaming, criticizing, complaining, and gossip.

It's an incredibly powerful practice to start cleaning that stuff out of our minds as we incline our minds to joy.

To recap:

Inclining our minds to joy = planting seeds in what will be a beautiful garden.

Nurturing our dissatisfaction = pouring concrete on our garden. :)

(So, now we've got cheese and mouse traps, eating rat poison, and pouring cement on our garden as great images to help us become more aware of habits that aren't serving us. :)

ENEMIES: NEAR AND FAR

"A warrior begins to take responsibility for the direction of her life. It's as if we are lugging around unnecessary baggage. Our training encourages us to open the bags and look closely at what we are carrying. In doing this we begin to understand that much of it isn't needed anymore."

Pema talks about the virtues (or "four limitless qualities") we want to cultivate and "the near and far enemies" to these virtues.

It goes like this:

Limitless Qualities	Near Enemy	Far Enemy
Loving-kindness	Attachment	Hatred or Aversion
Compassion	Pity Overwhelm Idiot Compassion	Cruelty
Joyfulness	Overexcitement	Envy
Equanimity	Detachment or Indifference	Prejudice

"Without loving-kindness for ourselves, it is difficult, if not impossible, to genuinely feel it for others."

~ Pema Chödrön

As Pema says: "These enemies are good teachers that show us that we can accept ourselves and others complete with imperfections. We develop trust in our open and forgiving mind. In doing so, we discover the strength that allows us to enter into the suffering of the world."

Check out the book for a full discussion of each of these limitless qualities and their enemies.

For now, let's look at a couple in more depth:

"Each moment is an opportunity to make a fresh start."

~ Pema Chödrön

PITY: A NEAR ENEMY OF COMPASSION

"Pity or professional warmth is easily mistaken for true compassion. When we identify ourselves as the helper, it means we see others as helpless. Instead of feeling the pain of the other person, we set ourselves apart. If we've ever been on the receiving end of pity we know how painful it feels. Instead of warmth and support all we feel is distance. With true compassion these up-down identities are stripped away."

This reminds me of an incredibly powerful model one of my friends and favorite teachers, [David Emerald](#), has developed. He calls it "The Dreaded Drama Triangle" (or "DDT" for short) and describes it in his great little book [The Power of TED*](#). Check out the Notes and his book for what I consider to be on the most elegantly simple and powerful models to understand how we're showing up in the world.

In short, Emerald tells us that we can assume one of two orientations in the world: that of a Victim or of a Creator. If we choose Victim, we see everyone as helpless and switch between our role as a Victim and that of a Persecutor and a Rescuer. The pity that [Pema](#) is describing above is very much a part of how a Rescuer would try to help someone.

To have true compassion, we need to step out of The Dreaded Drama Triangle and into what Emerald calls "The Empowerment Dynamic." From this position, we live as a Creator and we see others as inherently strong and capable of dealing with the challenges of the world.

Rather than fall into roles of the Persecutor or Rescuer, we become Challengers and Coaches. Seeing the inherent power of those around us, we can avoid the near enemy of Pity and live with true compassion.

IDIOT COMPASSION: PEMA-STYLE

"The third enemy of compassion is idiot compassion. This is when we avoid conflict and protect our good image by being kind when we should say a definite 'no.' Compassion doesn't imply only trying to be good. When we find ourselves in an aggressive relationship, we need to set clear boundaries. The kindest thing we can do for everyone concerned is to know when to say 'enough.' Many people use Buddhist ideals to justify self-debasement. In the name of not shutting our heart, we let people walk all over us. It is said that in order not to break our vow of compassion we have to learn when to stop aggression and draw the line. There are times when the only way to bring down the barriers is to set barriers."

Ah, idiot compassion.

This is a wonderfully touchy subject for people who can't imagine Jesus turning over money changer's tables in the temple or any "spiritual" person ever going to war.

Pema shares this story as well: "There is a traditional Buddhist story about a ship captain, Compassionate Heart, who was traveling with five hundred people when a pirate, Angry Spearman, boarded the boat and threatened to kill them all. The captain realized that if the pirate did this, he would be sowing seeds of his own intense suffering. Moved by compassion for both the pirate and the people, the captain killed Angry Spearman... There is no act that is inherently virtuous or non-virtuous. The warrior trains in the discipline of not causing harm, knowing that the way to do this skillfully will change with the circumstances. When we practice discipline with flexibility, we become less moralistic and more tolerant."

And Zen Master [Genpo Roshi](#) talks about true compassion in his great book [Big Mind Big Heart](#) (see Notes). He says this: "I am always compassionate, but sometimes in a very feminine, gentle way, nurturing and supportive, and sometimes in a very masculine way, ruthless and decisive. But I always have in my arsenal what is necessary to get the job done. I am totally integrated. There's no need to become integrated; I am Integrated Feminine/Masculine

"These same... masters advised that we not procrastinate. They urged us to use these instructions immediately—on this very day in this very situation—and not say to ourselves, 'I will try this in the future when I have a bit more time.'"

~ Pema Chödrön

Compassion. Another name for me is Big Heart."

Let's remember to maintain flexibility and integrate masculine and feminine compassion as we address idiot compassion—the near enemy of compassion!

ALL IS FLEETING AND IMPERMANENT

"That nothing is static or fixed, that all is fleeting and impermanent, is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything—every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and inanimate—is always changing, moment to moment. We don't have to be mystics or physicists to know this. Yet at the level of personal experience, we resist this basic fact. It means that life isn't always going to go our way. It means there's loss as well as gain. And we don't like that."

Impermanence.

We talk about this theme a lot because it's another one of those Ideas all of our great teachers come back to again and again.

I like [Anthony de Mello](#)'s lyrical words on the subject (see Notes on [Awareness](#)): *"As the great Confucius said, 'The one who would be in constant happiness must frequently change.' Flow. But we keep looking back, don't we? We cling to things in the past and cling to things in the present... Do you want to enjoy a symphony? Don't hold on to a few bars of the music. Don't hold on to a couple of notes. Let them pass, let them flow. The whole enjoyment of a symphony lies in your readiness to allow the notes to pass..."*

Beautiful... Let's enjoy the symphony and allow the notes to pass as we look closely and compassionately at the places that scare us, shall we?!?

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Dhammapada](#)

[The Diamond Cutter](#)

[Big Mind Big Heart](#)

[The Bhagavad Gita](#)

[The Power of Now](#)

[A New Earth](#)

[Awareness](#)

[The Power of TED*](#)

About the Author of "The Places That Scare You"

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Pema Chödrön (formerly known as Deirdre Blomfield-Brown) is an ordained Buddhist nun in the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, and a teacher in the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa. The goal of her work is the ability to apply Buddhist teachings in everyday life. A prolific author, she has conducted workshops, seminars, and meditation retreats in Europe, Australia, and throughout North America. She is resident teacher of Gampo Abbey, a monastery in rural Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.