

Precision, Gentleness, and Letting Go

By Pema Chodron.

In meditation and in our daily lives, there are three qualities that we can nurture, cultivate, and bring out. We already possess these, but they can be ripened: precision, gentleness, and the ability to let go.

When the Buddha taught, he didn't say that we were bad people, or that there was some sin that we had committed – original or otherwise—that made us more ignorant than clear, more harsh than gentle, more closed than open. He taught that there is a kind of innocent misunderstanding that we all share, something that can be turned around, corrected, and seen through, as if we were in a dark room and someone showed us where the light switch was. It isn't a sin that we are in the dark room. It's just an innocent situation, but how fortunate that someone shows us where the light switch is. It brightens up our life considerably. We can start to read books, to see one another's faces, to discover the colours of the walls, to enjoy the little animals that creep in and out of the room.

In the same way, if we see our so-called limitations with clarity, precision, gentleness, good-heartedness, and kindness and, having seen them fully, then let go, open further, we begin to find that our world is more vast and more refreshing and fascinating than we had realized before. In other words, the key to feeling more whole and less shut off and shut down is to be able to see clearly who we are and what we're doing.

The innocent mistake that keeps us caught in our own particular style of ignorance, unkindness, and shutdown-ness is that we are never encouraged to see clearly what is, with gentleness. Instead, there's a kind of basic misunderstanding that we should try to be better than we already are, that we should try to improve ourselves, that we should try to get away from painful things and that if we could just learn how to get away from the painful things, then we would be happy. That is the innocent, naïve misunderstanding that we all share, which keeps us unhappy.

Meditation is about seeing clearly the body that we have, the mind that we have, the domestic situation that we have, the job that we have, and the people who are in our lives. It's about seeing how we react to all these things. It's seeing our emotions and thoughts just as they are right now, in this very moment, in this very hall, on this very floor. It's about not trying to make them go away, not trying to become better than we are, but just seeing clearly with precision and gentleness. Throughout this time of meditation practice, we will work with cultivating gentleness, innate precision, and the ability to let go of small-mindedness, learning how to open to our thoughts and emotions, to all the people we meet in our world, how to open our minds and hearts.

This is not an improvement plan; it is not a situation in which you try to be better than you are now. If you have a bad temper, and you feel that you harm yourself and others, you might think that sitting for a week, or a month, will make your bad temper go away – you will be that sweet person that you always wanted to be. Never again will a harsh word leave your pure and aware lips. The problem is that the desire to change is fundamentally a form of aggression toward yourself.

The other problem is that our hang-ups, unfortunately or fortunately, contain our wealth. Our neurosis and our wisdom are made out of the same material. If you throw out your neurosis, you also throw out your wisdom. Someone who is very angry also has a lot of energy; that energy is what's so juicy about him or her. That's the reason people love that person. The idea isn't to try to get rid of your anger, but to make friends with it, to see it clearly with precision and honesty, and also to see it with gentleness. That means not judging yourself as a bad person, but also not bolstering yourself up by saying, "It's good that I'm this way, it's all right to be so angry all the time". The gentleness involves not repressing the anger, but also not acting it out.

It is something much softer and more openhearted than any of that. It involves learning how, once you have fully acknowledged the feeling of anger and the knowledge of who you are and what you do, to let it go. You can let go of the usual pitiful little story line that accompanies anger and begin to see clearly how you keep the whole thing going. So whether it's anger or craving or jealousy or fear or depression – whatever it might be – the notion is not to try to get rid of it, but to make friends with it. That means getting to know it completely, with some kind of softness, and learning how, once you've experienced it fully, to let go.

The meditation technique itself cultivates precision, gentleness, and the ability to let go—qualities that are innate within us. They are not something that we have to gain, but something that we could bring out, cultivate, and rediscover in ourselves. Now I'd like to discuss the meditation technique and point out how it helps bring out these qualities.

If we emphasized only precision, our meditation might become quite harsh and militant. It might get too goal-oriented. So we also emphasize gentleness. One thing that is very helpful is to cultivate an overall sense of relaxation while you are doing the meditation. I think you'll notice that as you become more mindful and more aware, and awake... you begin to notice that your stomach tends to get very tight. It helps a lot if you notice this and then purposely relax your stomach, relax your shoulders, and your neck. If you find it difficult to relax, just gradually, patiently, gently work with it.

The moment when you label your thoughts “thinking” is probably the key place in the technique where you cultivate gentleness, sympathy, and loving-kindness. Rinpoche used to say, “Notice your tone of voice when you say ‘thinking’.” It might be really harsh, but actually it’s just a euphemism for “Drat! You were thinking again, you dummy.” You might really be saying, “You fool, you absolutely miserable meditator, you’re hopeless.” But it’s not that at all. All that’s happened is that you’ve noticed. Good for you! You actually noticed! You’ve noticed that the mind thinks continuously, and it’s wonderful that you’ve seen that. Having seen it, let the thoughts go. Say, “Thinking.” If you notice that you’re being harsh, say it a second time, just to cultivate the feeling that you could say it to yourself with gentleness and kindness, in other words, that you are cultivating a nonjudgmental attitude. You are not criticizing yourself, you are just seeing what *is* with precision and gentleness, seeing thinking as thinking. That is how this technique cultivates not only precision but also softness, gentleness, and a sense of warmth toward oneself. The honesty of precision and the good-heartedness of gentleness are qualities of making friends with yourself. So during this period, along with being as precise as you can, really emphasize the softness. If you find your body tensing, relax it. If you find your mind tensing, relax it. Feel the expansiveness of the breath going out into the space. When thoughts come up, touch them very lightly, like a feather touching a bubble. Let the whole thing be soft and gentle, but at the same time, precise.

The experience of labeling your thoughts “thinking” also, over time, becomes much more vivid. You may be completely caught up in a fantasy, in remembering the past or planning for the future, completely caught up, as if you had gotten on an airplane and flown away some place. You’re elsewhere... you are with other people and you’ve redecorated a room or, ... you’ve relived a pleasant or unpleasant experience... or, you’ve gotten all caught up in worrying about something that might happen, or ... you’re getting a lot of pleasure from thinking about something that may happen... but you’re completely involved as if in a dream. Then suddenly, you realize, and you just come back. It happens automatically. You say to yourself. “Thinking,” and as you’re saying that, basically, what you are doing, is letting go of those thoughts. You don’t repress thoughts. You acknowledge them as “thinking” very clearly and kindly, but then you let them go. Once you begin to get the hang of this, it’s incredibly powerful. You could be completely obsessed with hope and fear and all kinds of other thoughts and then you realize what you’ve been doing – without criticizing it – and you let it go. This is probably one of the most amazing tools that you could be given, the ability to just let things go, not to be caught in the grip of your own angry thoughts, passionate thoughts, worried thoughts, or depressed thoughts. -----“Just----- let----- go.”