

HOW TO MEDITATE—PEMA CHÖDRÖN—SUMMARY

This following is all paraphrase and quote from the book *How to Meditate* by Pema Chödrön (when I use the words ‘her’ and ‘she’ I am referring to Pema Chödrön). Key points are highlighted in **key-lime**. Light turquoise points have useful elaborations in the book. I’m not attempting to be original. I may add a few comments but will not always say when (I will highlight some of my comments in **lavender**). Thus almost all the inspiration and words here are due to the author but the shortcomings are not hers. In the beginning I used quotes for transcription and paraphrase but I finally began to transcribe a lot and so dropped quotes.

PLAN OF ACTION

1. Meditate every day—early morning or after exercise; briefly at night with review.
2. Begin with the basics; work through the ‘objects’ of meditation
3. Select essential aspects for meditation: (a) Ideas and reality (b) emotion, feeling judged and its inhibitions, and freedom—‘space’

CONTENTS

<i>How to Meditate—Pema Chödrön—</i>			
<i>Summary</i>	3	14. Emotions as the Object of Meditation	10
Introduction	3	15. Getting Our Hands Dirty	10
<i>Part One. The Technique Of Meditation</i>	4	16. Hold the Experience	11
1. Preparing for Practice and Making the Commitment	4	17. Breathing with the Emotion	11
2. Stabilizing the Mind	4	18. Drop the Story and Find the Feeling	12
3. The Six Points of Posture	4	<i>Part Four. Working with Sense Perceptions</i>	14
4. Breath	5	19. The Sense Perceptions	14
5. Attitude	5	20. The Interconnectdness of All Perceptions	14
6. Unconditional Friendliness	5	<i>Part Five. Opening Your Heart to Include Everything</i>	16
7. You Are Your Own Meditation Instructor	6	21. Giving Up the Struggle	16
<i>Part Two. Working With Thoughts</i>	7	22. The Seven Delights	17
8. The Monkey Mind	7	23. The Bearable Lightness of Being	18
9. The Three Levels of Discursive Thought	7	24. Beliefs	19
10. Thoughts as the Object of Meditation	7	25. Relaxing with Groundedness	19
11. Regard All Dharmas as Dreams	7	26. Create a Circle of Practicioners	20
<i>Part Three. Working With Emotions</i>	9	27. Cultivate a Sense of Wonder	20
12. Becoming Intimate with Our Emotions	9	28. The Way of the Boddhisattva	21
13. The Space withing the Emotion	9		

HOW TO MEDITATE—PEMA CHÖDRÖN—SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The mind is wild. Being open to the arc of experience, we can be more settled amid what life brings us.

We think the world is graspable. But every moment is new, unique. Sitting meditation teaches us how to relate to the present moment directly free from conceptual overlay.

The true source of suffering is the mind—not circumstance. Meditation is about awakening fully to the joy and difficulty of life just as it is.

Note that suffering is not pain. Buddha said ‘I teach one thing: suffering and the cessation of suffering.’ His word for suffering was dukkha which means continual dissatisfaction with the pleasant and unpleasant situations that are part and parcel of life.

Pema then talks of cultivating and nurturing **five qualities** that begin to come forth over months and years of practice of sitting meditation.

Steadfastness in allowing all experience—pleasant and unpleasant—in meditating.

Clear seeing or awareness—through steadfastness, beginning to form non-judgmental, unbiased clarity of just seeing one’s emotions and thoughts.

Gradual arising of courage—to experience emotional discomfort... the trials and tribulations of life.

Becoming awake to our lives—the absolute essence of meditation. Learning to be just here. She talks of how, even after she was considered advanced, her niece irritated her and ‘blew her cover’—embarrassed her. Being awake will not get rid of this kind of thing but help open us up to letting it be.

‘*No big deal*’—she talks of an attitude to ups and downs, success and failure, in life and meditation. ‘No big deal’ is an attitude cultivated toward these. It is being stable. **It seems a little like detachment.** *Detachment* is the opposite of giving up on life. It is giving up on ego so as to live and be fully.

PART ONE. THE TECHNIQUE OF MEDITATION

1. PREPARING FOR PRACTICE AND MAKING THE COMMITMENT

How to begin.

Begin where you are. / Have a schedule. / Decide how long*. The length of sessions can be increased later. / Place and seat. / Have a timer.

* She suggests 20 minutes to begin, perhaps 10 if 20 is too much.

Shamatha—presence to experience—is a central goal. Meditation on an object is the means.

Shamatha is calm abiding—being present to experience (thoughts and emotions, positive and negative) which gives non avoidance and stability and is a central goal. ‘Placing the mind on an object is the backbone of shamatha practice.’

2. STABILIZING THE MIND

Settle—allow yourself to be completely as you are. Check in:

Body—physical sensations in the different parts.

Emotions—strong, mild; do not avoid or discount the negative or the positive.

Thoughts—busy, still; drowsy, alert; obsessive or calm; content.

‘Spirit’—centered, related or otherwise.

3. THE SIX POINTS OF POSTURE

Seat—**flat and stable**; to encourage a posture of openness (see torso below).

Hands—‘**resting the mind mudra**’, resting on the thighs palms down and positioned to keep stable; **or, for alertness, Zen mudra**, one palm over the other, thumbs touching, hands held up from the lap a little.

Torso—**upright and relaxed**, imagine a string at the top of your head lifting you... but relax the shoulders, don’t lift them (to relax them lift then relax). This is important to keep the front of the body open.

Eyes—she suggests meditating with **eyes open**. ‘**We meditate to become open to life**’; this is not transcendental meditation.

Face—allow the **mouth** to be **slightly but not noticeably open**; this relaxes face, jaw, and neck; it minimizes sense of struggle which carries over also to making minor adjustments for physical and mental discomfort. But **don’t adjust for discomfort immediately**; stay with the discomfort a little, then slowly move into a more relaxed posture. **Notice tension and let go**.

Legs—**cross legged**, knees not higher than the waist. Use a chair if sitting cross legged is painful or exacerbates any injuries.

Avoid major struggle—be relaxed; in these points you want to embody a sense of relaxation, openness, and dignity; you want to embody an expression of being awake and confident.

4. BREATH

The Practice of Letting Go

Begin meditating by focusing gently on the breath. It is the object to **come back** to **when your mind wanders**. (Later she considers other objects such as perception.)

The breath is good because it is impermanent, always changing, flowing; it is not a stable thing.

Feeling the breath is the goal—not concentrating on it. ‘Allow’ the breath to go in and out.

Focus on the out breath as opening to the world, letting go of fixations.

As practice grows you can lighten your attention on the breath, allowing calm abiding in the open space of the present moment.

5. ATTITUDE

Keep coming back to the present moment.

6. UNCONDITIONAL FRIENDLINESS

The mind is wild. **A goal** in meditation is to calm the wild mind—to ‘**stay**’. Staying, perseverance, loyalty that come with meditation—**this is all very gentle**, or **compassionate in motivation**—‘**maitri**’ or lovingkindness. It is not self-indulgent, nor is it intended as an avoidance.

‘Maitri’ is a lovingkindness, an equanimity toward self, non-judgmental—unconditional friendliness toward yourself—accepting the pleasant and the painful parts.

7. YOU ARE YOUR OWN MEDITATION INSTRUCTOR

‘Of the two witnesses, trust the principle one.’ This ‘lojong’ from Tibetan Buddhism encourages looking more closely at our mind and habits.

She suggests: **work with a teacher** of some kind... but ‘they can’t see whether you’re too spaced out or too tense...’ **but ‘You’re the only one who knows how much peacefulness you feel, how much settled-ness you feel—and in that sense you are wise enough to be your own meditation guide** in this practice of meditation.’

Your awareness of the points of meditation so far is good but ‘I would also say that **the key meditation instruction that you should give yourself** as your own teacher of meditation, **is to simply relax into what is. We don’t need to *do* anything.**’

Cultivate the child-like ability to ‘drop into the present’.

PART TWO. WORKING WITH THOUGHTS

A goal of meditation is to allow thoughts dispassionately—without disturbance.

8. THE MONKEY MIND

The mind is wild with thoughts.

We train our mind in meditation—the way to do that is to meditate.

Label the thoughts ‘thinking’ and come back to the object of meditation—breath.

9. THE THREE LEVELS OF DISCURSIVE THOUGHT

The three levels are wild, distracting, and just so.

Label the wild and the distracting ‘thinking’ and come back to breath.

The just so are thoughts that ‘don’t draw you off’. The just so should be recognized but need not be labeled. With experience in meditation these happen more; in the background; but—there is no need to struggle to not have thoughts—that is not possible; this situation is good.

Three concepts are supports in relaxing around your thoughts—‘gentleness’, ‘patience’, and ‘humor’. Have a sense of humor about the fact that your mind is like a wild monkey.

10. THOUGHTS AS THE OBJECT OF MEDITATION

In the just so thoughts stage you are observing your thoughts. This is the meditation.

There will be moments of pure unconsciousness where you say ‘oops’ or ‘absent for a moment’. These are moments of pure meditation.

It seems that we are allowing but not emphasizing the states of transcendental meditation.

11. REGARD ALL DHARMAS AS DREAMS

This means regard all thoughts as dreams.

The idea is to not take thoughts too seriously. This does not mean un-seriously—it means not so seriously as to be constrictive.

Un-seriously and too seriously are both restrictive on creativity—the former because of a plethora of non-realism and the latter because of a lack of imagination. Of course this is context dependent—it is not stipulation against fantasy. But perhaps it should be unnecessary to say so.

A goal of 'dharma as dreams' is to have spacious mind—an enormous amount of room in which to move around. Too much seriousness (over-criticism) means no movement; too little means no room.

PART THREE. WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

I think the main point of this part is to allow—perhaps to become comfortable—with all emotion, positive and negative, soft and extreme. The goals seem to be, first, to reach an equilibrium—to be sensitive to emotion but not dominated by it and second to be alive amid emotion and perhaps to find its context dependent appropriate mode of sharing.

12. BECOMING INTIMATE WITH OUR EMOTIONS

Emotions will arise in meditation—including strong and painful ones.

The first step is to notice—to acknowledge it—when it happens.

Next—drop the story, e.g. don't explain the pain away, but lean in to it. Experience it, allow it.

Like the Buddha you can then come to know your own energy and feel quite settled with it.

There is a great story of her granddaughter's mother (the author's daughter in law) who died of alcoholism at age forty-eight—after 10 years of recovery and then relapse. The 'punch line', from a college admission essay by the author's seventeen year old granddaughter, is that when you 'leave out the emotions you don't want to feel... it eats away at you underneath... and you have to find an escape... And my mother's escape was alcohol.'

13. THE SPACE WITHING THE EMOTION

When you acknowledge emotion a *space* is created—within which you can choose how to react.

The reaction includes not just behavior but especially—how you feel and judge about the negative feeling... the ripples and waves and feedback and self-negation etc. that are the result but not part of the original emotion.

'You stay with the emotion rather than turning it into an automatic reaction' as had been habitual for years.

'And if you don't reject the emotions, they actually become your friends. They become your support... for 'returning the mind to its natural, open state... for being fully awake and present... for being conscious rather than unconscious... for being present rather than distracted... it's a whole different way of living, a whole different way of looking at the same old stuff.'

14. EMOTIONS AS THE OBJECT OF MEDITATION

Emotion is universal—the arising of the natural dynamic energy of life.

Here she talks of you getting in touch with your emotions.

She suggests a sitting meditation in which you recall an unpleasant emotion (not too traumatic to begin).

She suggests an exercise. Begin by sitting a minute and find a painful memory. Next, find a pleasant memory. With these in mind begin your meditation session. Focus on breath—refocus if your mind wanders; do this for a short time, perhaps five minutes. Now explore the painful emotion. Be present with it (when stories or mind wandering occur, bring focus back without labels ‘right’ or ‘wrong’); notice the thoughts, the thinking, then bring yourself back to the emotion. To complete the exercise, repeat it with the pleasant emotion.

‘There, in the immediacy of the emotion, feeling into it, lies the possibility of moving into openness and acceptance.’ And liberating and eventually settling—she exhorts the exploration of your range of emotions.

15. GETTING OUR HANDS DIRTY

This highlights the importance of a point already made—‘Without direct experience of our emotions, we can never touch the heart of Buddha nature’. But what is direct experience of emotion and how do we come to have it?

First, a parenthesis, What is Buddha nature? ‘Buddha nature and the natural state are not just made up of happy, sweet emotions; Buddha nature includes everything. It’s the calm, and the disturbed, and the roiled up and the still; it’s the bitter and the sweet, the comfortable and the uncomfortable. Buddha nature includes opening up to all of these things, and it’s found in the midst of all of them.’

Two things happen with emotion—we label them ‘good’, ‘bad’ (‘to seek’, ‘to avoid’); and ‘me’ and ‘not me’ (which locks them in or out—and, so, frozen).

The approach to direct experience of emotions, then, is to not tell stories, to not label, to not think about them. But that is what we do. This is where meditation comes in. We experience the emotion—positive and negative—but when we begin to think we label it ‘thinking’ and return to the emotion (as with thoughts and breath). This approach reveals ‘direct experience of

emotion’—she calls it a ‘felt sense’ of emotion. She relates an experience of meditating on a painful emotion that would not go away (because she was living with the source—another woman who apparently hated her) when she meditated on it all night and saw her own ego structure as hanging on to the pain. I am inferring from what she says that the ego is where the stories begin (inferring because she doesn’t say that the ego structure is associated with the sidetracking with thinking and words and stories designed to minimize the pain in the short term).

‘You have to get dirty with your emotions. Meditation allows you to feel—to get dirty with—your emotions. It gives us a lot of insight into why we do the things we do and why other people do the things they do. Out of this insight compassion is born.’ (To others and ourselves.) ‘This insight also begins to open the doorway to Buddha nature and the complete, open spaciousness that’s available when we’re not blocking our feelings. Once I was able to allow myself to have a felt sense of my emotions, it was completely liberating.’

In a quote from Ponlop Rinpoche ‘Until you begin to really relate with the unfavorable or the unpleasant things as part of your meditation—they’re not the whole thing—but until you start working with them, you don’t really have the quality of being on a path of awakening.’

16. HOLD THE EXPERIENCE

Continues to elaborate and emphasize points already made. Her descriptions of avoidance and resentment are really good.

The point is that when painful emotion arises in meditation and ‘post meditation’ (i.e. the rest of the day) we tend to go into all kinds of contortions—justification, self-negation, explanation, planning revenge, using illness...

The point is to just hold the experience...

‘I promise you that when you allow yourself to truly experience the rawness of your emotions, a whole new way of seeing the world, of experiencing love and compassion, will be revealed to you.’

17. BREATHING WITH THE EMOTION

The habitual patterns that come up when we feel strong emotion can be places where we can get stopped in our tracks in our path of awakening—or where we could make enormous progress if we are willing to allow thoughts and emotions to become part of the path.

When the emotion arises go to the body and breath in and out, and at the same time also experience the emotion (don't repress the emotion by just going to the breath).

The more it's repressed the bigger it becomes. So just experience it.

Breathe with it; don't breathe it away. The point is to go to our experience not our avoidance strategies. It's not easy but it's important.

There are two exits you are choosing not to take—not to act out by speaking or doing and not to repress anything. You can embody this in your entire life—not to act out, not to repress. See what happens if you don't do these things.

When allowing emotions they can disappear, intensify, or stay the same. But (quoting Mingyur Rinpoche) 'They disappear / stay / intensify as they are.' (But) It's not as though you're supposed to have a certain result or that we have to label the experiences 'good' or 'bad'.

Many meditators have noticed that, over time, when we stay with our emotions and breath with them, they can morph. Here is where we can really see that emotions are just energy (that we attach our thoughts and stories to).

18. DROP THE STORY AND FIND THE FEELING

The point has already been made (she re-illustrates it with a little analogy of flags which are torn by high winds—our feelings—and the flag poles that are steadfast—'But using thoughts or emotions as the object of meditation is experiencing life from the perspective of the flagpole.')

Do this exercise—

She describes an exercise 'Finding the feeling' or 'giving friendly attention to felt emotion—we're trying to get at a nonverbal experience'—

Set a timer for twenty minutes and do about five minutes of breath meditation.

Now bring up a strong emotion (if one hasn't already surfaced). It need not be negative.

How does it feel? What is its texture? Where is it located in your body? Is it sharp or dull? You're looking for a felt answer. If thoughts come up, note it, and come back to just finding the feeling.

Continue this over a few minutes. Is there rise and subsidence of feeling? If you let go of thoughts, the energy may be able to move? Is that your experience?

If you used words to describe the emotion what feeling do you associate with the words—e.g., ‘pleasant’, ‘unpleasant’, ‘painful’, ‘tight’, ‘tingling’, or ‘tense’?

If the emotion is strong, breath more deeply so a sense of space and openness and friendliness can come in and support you. If you are feeling nothing at all—what does that feel like, what does ‘blank’ or ‘neutral’ feel like. If you are feeling resistance, boredom, pain, ask ‘What is this?’ You’re not looking for a verbal answer, you’re looking for an experience. What is this?

Locate the feeling in your body. A way to use emotions as support, help in awakening is to use the way the emotion is affecting your body as part of meditation. It might be easier to locate a part or aspect of your body ‘temperature rising’, ‘sweating’, ‘palms moist’, ‘stomach in a knot’...

Sit with the feeling till the timer goes off. Now rest in the experience of whatever came up. ‘Sit in the home base of your being, the vast spaciousness of your mind, the open dimension of you.’

Unpleasantness may remain. But there can be the feeling of having a lot of space around the emotion. We might feel less smothered by it.

‘In this exercise we’re training for real life. Through meditation we can learn to give the strong emotions that come up more space so we can feel more settled when they do arise.’

PART FOUR. WORKING WITH SENSE PERCEPTIONS

Sense perception is the final aspect of mind she takes up. It can be used as an object of meditation. For some people it might be most appropriate. In going through the main aspects of mind she is—I don't know if she says it—setting the stage for integration.

19. THE SENSE PERCEPTIONS

I will summarize. Some themes of the chapter are:

Perceptions can be used as objects.

For some people perceptions may be better than breath. She cites the example of a person with asthma.

Sound, sight, sensation (touch and inner feeling), taste, and smell can be used.

She gives exercises for each of the senses (except smell which she explores via its potential to trigger chain reactions of behavior and story telling). She suggests ways to explore each sense. A first value of the exercises is that they may suggest various ways and varieties of experience.

She explores how perceptions lead into stories, judgment, distraction and emphasizes the now familiar 'don't judge, just come back'.

Emphasizes how these meditations are training in being alive to the moment and avoiding and eliminating 'baggage' including judgment. Reminder: success is incremental and partial; but don't judge, just come back to meditation.

Cites fMRI experiments that suggest that normal patterns correspond to established neural pathways that are the result of and that maintain habits of thought and response—of judgment and defense... and that meditation helps attenuate the old pathways and build new ones.

This is grounding for integrating all aspects of mind which she will explore in the next chapter.

20. THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ALL PERCEPTIONS

Sensation, thought, and emotion—with and without conceptual overlay—are interconnected.

You can use any particular in-the-moment aspect—i.e. without overlay of judgment and distraction—as means of support in meditation

Sitting meditation is education in being fully present and having 'wide open' mind. In being fully present, I surmise, it is not necessary to focus on a facet; the sitting practice may lead to the ability to be present to the whole body of experience without the overlay. An education in decreasing the drain of overlay and heightening realism and creativity.

Meditation is a way out of locked in perception which may give a sense of security but a false sense of security—especially ways of seeing self, others, and others' view of self and reaction to others' views. Keep meditating when this overlay occurs—'you'll be surprised'. 'When something changes from your side and you see how your emotional responses are operating, then something changes in the dynamic between you and the other person.'

PART FIVE. OPENING YOUR HEART TO INCLUDE EVERYTHING

She's exploring the themes of (a) where meditation can take us (b) integration of the aspects of meditation.

21. GIVING UP THE STRUGGLE

The 'struggle' is not wanting life to be the way it is. Symptom: our minds are always 'elsewhere'.

Meditation is practice in keeping an 'open space' to not fight the symptom but practice in recognizing it—its various manifestations e.g. anger, explaining, labeling—and coming back to the object of meditation such as breath, the emotion or perception itself and ultimately to what is real. This begins perhaps in sitting meditation but continues into 'post meditation'—i.e. 'in action'. Benefit *and practice* continue into action.

In other words meditation does not promise idealized perfection. The practice always continues. It is not rigid and you will find new ways. You learn from a teacher or yourself and you continue yourself (and may even be called to teach). But there are no perfect masters—of one showing another or oneself.

Note that though she is talking of a certain kind of meditation—of presence and openness rather than of transcendence—and though she is talking of sitting meditation in the beginning, she extends and shows how the extension occurs to transcendental meditation as well as meditation in action.

There is an apparent paradox surrounding all such practices. There is an apparent promise of perfection and yet we never become perfect. 'We are always at the beginning.' The resolution is twofold. (1) We are not seeking the ideal but seeking to move in the direction of an ideal. We are doing two things—bringing more balance and opening up. (2) We are not giving up on living at all including the idea of achievement. Meditation opens up to this, helps remove obstacles, improves the experience. In the end it does not entirely matter if one is messed up; one can still achieve and enjoy. How much energy should one devote to resolving the 'mess up'? The answer is 'some' for that may improve the experience and the outcome. We don't want, however, except perhaps in monasticism to devote our whole lives to a practice (meditation). This suggests a different meaning to perfection—one that is in-process and perhaps occasional rather than permanent and perfect (which might be death even while alive).

She offers an exercise on meditation-in-action—‘Attention to activity as a simple meditation’.

The activity is to be a simple one. After a while, she suggests, ‘you don’t even think about an object of meditation. There’s just the continual coming back, and a more and more continuous sense of presence. The wonderful sense of just being present comes in ‘blips’ and one day you may arrive at just being present and gorgeously alive.

22. THE SEVEN DELIGHTS

The meaning of ‘delight’ in this chapter may be a surprise.

She is talking of meditating in relation to ‘difficult’ experiences and times. There is a natural tendency to ‘not go there’—to deny, to avoid, to escape. We fixate on the anger and despair. We lose our meditation practice. The way becomes much less clear.

She calls these ‘delights’ because ‘these tough moments are the very things that teach us the most; sometimes they are the very things that open us up to life and to connection with others.’

I’ve experienced this and I sometimes wonder whether giving myself a crisis may not be a good thing—a motivator. I don’t know the answer but the ‘crisis’ should be real—not contrived. How might it go? Here’s a simple and obvious possibility—while planning and preparing for what you want to do in life is good it is also good to take the plunge. Perhaps a balance of careful stepping and planning and plunging. Having prepared the plunge is not altogether blind. However, taking the plunge itself brings out other resources and what’s more is the thing itself. Maybe there are times to just plunge.

She reproduces a poem by Gotsampa on the seven delights or obstacles to being present that are ‘perfect teachers’ (1) Dichotomy of perceiver and perceived—self, other (2) ‘Kleshas’—‘emotional states that tend to hook us or disturb us the most’ (3) Demonic forces—‘maras’—‘Mara’ is the legendary demon who tempted Buddha with his beautiful daughters (pretty girls with pink lace hose) (4) ‘Samsara’—the repeating cycle of birth and death / feeling of pointlessness of this life (5) Painful illness (6) Approaching death (7) When nothing’s working and the universe is lined up against you.

The point to the poem and the commentary is (an instruction on how) to turn these difficulties into ‘delights’—how to make you more present and alive.

Don’t avoid, don’t solve the unsolvable—don’t meditate without them—plunge into them. (Obviously not saying don’t solve the solvable—which brings to mind the ‘serenity prayer’.)

Don't focus on the object of anger—focus on the anger, the ego. 'Chase away' the ego; but the point is that awareness of 'ego' versus 'real' is the first step.

Turn suffering into compassion.

In all cases of difficulty focus on the mind as source—'Don't follow the object of hatred—look at the angry mind. Anger liberated by itself as it arises is mirrorlike wisdom'. Similarly 'Don't look at the object of pride, desire...' "They're not a problem if you give these tendencies your attention."

Regarding kleshas she says 'don't squelch the emotion' but, quoting, "Like an alchemistic potion, turning metal into gold / What lies in the kleshas power to bestow / Is bliss without contagion, completely undefiled. / Kleshas coming up, sheer delight." And explains "This is a very profound teaching, and it's actually what we're doing when we meditate through the most adverse conditions. We are welcoming the view that the things we think or feel are wrecking our lives are actually gifts for our transformation." Having learned the truth that 'crisis is opportunity' we turn this via focus (meditation) into learning—a way, an approach of meditation.

"The seven delights introduce us to the idea that nothing is fundamentally a problem, except our identification with it."

Question—so is there nothing that is a problem that cannot be overcome? I think there are problems that are so deep that they will defeat all our resources. An example: a mental illness or a brain injury or decay that removes all our resources but does not remove pain and meaninglessness. Answer—if that happens or is the case it happens or is the case and may be horrible (but is not a problem in the sense of something that can be overcome). On the other hand, while we do have resources we often fear such outcomes—that fear is a problem which is an occasion for learning (meditation). Unclear thinking (avoidance, not attending) leads to confusion of the problem with the non-problem.

23. THE BEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

We make a big deal of our problems—it's human nature. But 'it's not about belittling things, but on the other hand not fanning the fire until you have your own private World War III.'

'Keeping these ideas in balance allows us to feel less crowded and claustrophobic. In Buddhist terms, the space that opens up is *shunyata* or emptiness. But there's nothing nihilist about this

emptiness. It's basically just a feeling of lightness. There's a movie called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but I prefer to see life from the view of the Bearable Lightness of Being.'

Judgmental thoughts (labels without true significance) arise—practice letting them go and seeing what's there when they go. This is the essence of mindfulness practice. This is how we can experiment with shunyata, how we can experiment with the open, boundless dimension of being.'

24. BELIEFS

She comments on how we die and kill for belief. The point is not these 'big' issues but how we cling to belief, especially 'little' ones that are not so little in how they rule our lives and block opportunity.

There are big beliefs 'Republicans / Democrats are evil' that hold us up (in part the way we see, in part we feel threatened—but the feeling neither guarantees nor eliminates any real threat but may shut us down generally and particularly to the problem). There are little, personal beliefs. 'He's a jerk.' We don't want to give these up. Why? We feel pain and 'He's a jerk' helps resolve the pain—but only briefly and temporarily till the next time or the next something.

"So in meditation we have an in-depth earnest discussion with ourselves. A really serious talk. ...well-being and making peace with ourselves has a lot to do with the quality of space we find in meditation, which is shunyata or emptiness. This open space reminds us to lighten up."

You—we—will resist. She recounts a trick a 'wild yogi' taught her 'just say POT'. The trick helped her because it was a spark for insight into what was going on.

"And bring as much honesty—and curiosity—as you can to your practice."

25. RELAXING WITH GROUNDEDNESS

We misperceive reality. The essence of meditation practice is training in being able to perceive reality correctly.

'Enlightenment—full enlightenment—is perceiving reality with an open, unfixated mind, even in the most difficult circumstances.'

She—we—use the term Buddha nature' to refer to the open, unfettered mind that constantly perceives reality correctly (which we have all experienced in little doses). 'Prajna' is clear wisdom—we begin to develop this—the first big discovery is that we think so much. We begin to

move in the direction of clear wisdom and not somewhere else or attaining something—but to the blinders coming off. It's gradual—that's why relaxation and letting go are important. Buddha nature is here and if we were relaxed and awake enough, we would experience it.

Trust the gradualness and welcome in a quality of patience and sense of humor—if the walls came down too fast we wouldn't be ready.

It's not linear. There are setbacks. Early in meditation there can be a 'honeymoon'. Then the first setback can be a big shock. People are ready to quit.

But 'hitting a brick wall is just a stage'. A chance to go further into the difficulty, the unpleasant aspects of life. It's a chance to go further—to join life with fluidity and openness.

(It's a meditation upon meditation.)

26. CREATE A CIRCLE OF PRACTITIONERS

In Buddhism the 'three jewels' of support are the Buddha as example, the dharma or teachings and practices, and sangha—the community of people who are also committed to awakening.

'To me, sangha is a central support in meditation practice.' It is where we refrain from competition and one-upping; we tell each other the truth of our experience.

Sangha members do not have to be in the same place—you can write, phone, be online.

An image of community is one of everyone standing together maintaining unconditional friendship; if someone falls, not everybody falls. People are taking responsibility for their escalations, judgments, prejudices; helping one another.

It's not 'just' community. It's part of it. It could be moving out—haltingly—into the world.

27. CULTIVATE A SENSE OF WONDER

Wonder—enjoyment, awe at being present. It's about everything—little and big.

A problem? We're drawn to things—some that represent escape from misery, that represent comfort can occupy a lot of space—they can be addictions. We react against trees, animals, sounds and memories; smells and tastes; people's faces, bodies, gestures. We take it for granted that these things are the way they are and therefore we live in a kind of prison.

How to bring wonder and curiosity into our lives? Begin with the meditation instruction about being gentle and honest. Every time you say ‘thinking’ do it with such gentleness and such honesty. All the stories and drama—‘just thinking’. You don’t need an answer to make the unknown and the known OK—just relax. Train in softening, relaxing; use your practice; train in holding your seat with the uncertain, insecure, embarrassed, shaky feelings. This is productive of great well-being.

Practice is about allowing space. About how to connect with that spaciousness that’s inside, and the spaciousness that’s outside. Learning to relax, soften, often—connecting to the sense that there’s actually a lot of room.

28. THE WAY OF THE BODDHISATTVA

Bodhichitta is bodhi—wide awake or enlightened, and chitta—‘heart’ and ‘mind’ or ‘heart-mind’.

So, bodhichitta is completely open or awake heart-mind; Chögyam Trungpa called it ‘soft spot’—which we all have but somehow feel we need to cover it and protect it.

Meditation teaches us to nurture bodhichitta; to dissolve the barriers to it. Dissolving the armor isn’t about a final answer—there is always room to be more, a place for flexibility so as to continue to experience, adapt.

Another meaning to bodhichitta—becoming a completely loving person. She feels this is why we practice—this is what the world needs.

A quality of bodhichitta—growing ability to relax with the true, unpredictable, uncertain nature of reality... it’s not *like this* or *like that*... and to have and feel security amid uncertainty.

Meditation allows us to walk more and more into uncertainty and the sense of insecurity until it becomes our home ground—what felt insecure no longer feels so. Resistance to change and newness begins to melt.

In relaxing more into uncertainty and groundlessness your heart opens up—to the degree that you can allow and step into difficult situations.

And you increasingly see suffering and how our choices perpetuate it. She is ‘sorry’ to report this. But you begin to see what escalates, what de-escalates suffering—and stepping into relaxing with groundlessness becomes something you wish for everyone.

Meditation is a process of transformation—of becoming more and more open.

Note—some people become more fixed as they grow older; others become more flexible.

The moment when we're in pain, we feel we've met our edge—this is often the powerful moment on the spiritual journey. This is when we can do something different—we can liberate ourselves. And often doing something different is really just staying.

Often great suffering brings bitterness... anger, desire for revenge. But you can seize the moment: cherish that moment of pain and open up. Then, as it's also said, great suffering creates or brings great compassion. Instead of hardening, you start in the direction of love and kindness—for others and yourself.

Where? We find the love in ourselves. That is the point. Love is not out there in relationship, career, family, spiritual path. But if you begin to connect with the fact that you have a good heart—that it can be woken, nurtured—then your life (career, relationship, family, path) becomes means for awakening bodhichitta. Your life is it. There's no other place to practice.

Life and practice become one.

— END —