

Excerpts From *Getting Unstuck*

by Pema Chödrön

Session 1: Learning to Stay – Our subject is learning to stay. The truth is that anyone who's meditated even one day learns that we are almost never present... I recently heard a teaching that we are all like young children who have a bad case of scabies, and we're old enough to scratch it, but not old enough to know that when you scratch it, it gets worse... This is also the description of staying with the itch and not scratching... if the child wants to heal and if the child has enough love for themselves, they will... go through the discomfort of the itch and not scratching. And eventually they will get their own reward and the urge to scratch gets less and the itch becomes less... So we'll explore that itch and learn to stay, when it's itching or not itching. Your mind will go crazy: "If I don't scratch this I'm going to be seriously ill, to go stark-raving mad." "This is really stupid! I mean, what's the problem with itching?"

Session 2: The Habit of Distraction – We're lost in thought almost all the time and it takes us away... Suppose you're angry. You could stay with the feeling without acting, but often we're off running, and making the pattern stronger. So the definition of habituation is "getting better at it." And the more we *strengthen* it, the more we *do* it... With meditation you can learn *how* to open up the space. Go to your breath, be open and curious... we will never get at the root unless we experience the unease, the root, the *shenpa*, and not acting out... In all the Buddhist teachings, it's not about trying to cast something out, but to see clearly... This is what Buddhists mean when they say, don't get caught in the content; go to the place where you're hooked, where the desire to scratch exists... think of four R's: recognizing, refraining, relaxing into the underlying feeling, and something called resolve – I'll do this again and again... it comes back, because we've been habituating ourselves to move away, to strengthen the urge, for a long, long, long time and it's not an overnight miracle that we can release that habituation.

Session 3: Meditation, the Path to Enlightenment – Many people – even after many years – use meditation as repression, and it's sometimes difficult to see you're doing that... what I was taught and also teach is "Let the story line go." It isn't the thought that's the problem, it's that the thought has hooked you... So what you're doing is interrupting the... strong habituation... Coming back is hard to do because, "Yes, but... I *have* to do this..." something so juicy that's giving you so much pleasure, or because you're so worried or so angry or thinking "I should have said..." where the *shenpa* is so strong it's like waking from a dream when you do come back. You didn't will that to happen, it just happened. Then it ended. That's the natural capacity of mind. We do come back naturally... come back to the breath and let the breath itself somehow give it some space, give you a way to stay with the feeling.

Session 4: Enjoying the Process – The path of moving in this direction... is fundamentally learning to stay, with a good sense of humor, with loving kindness, bringing warmth and gentleness into the situation. It's the basis of humility, impossible to be arrogant, the basis of compassion. The more you stand in your own shoes, the more you recognize... what human beings are up against with that urge and that drive to move away, the more you begin to have enormous compassion for the crazy antics of other people... Touch the thoughts lightly. Touching them *is* the letting go... there's a practice called "One in the beginning and one in the end." When you wake up in the morning you make your aspiration for the day... They change day by day, sometimes glorious, sometimes mundane, but some sense of living your life as a ceremony. Living your life with intention... Then at the end of the day you look back over. You can go into despair mode about what a failure you are. When you see that you connected with your aspiration, even briefly, once during the day, I feel joy that I saw it. When I see that I blew it completely, I rejoice that I was

able to see that. What is it, after all, that *sees* that we blew it? Couldn't we just identify with the wisdom that sees that?... Then if we can do the next step of refraining from going down the road, we should rejoice that sometimes we have the ability to interrupt the momentum of the *shenpa*. And we should expect relapses... The ego hates seeing. Learning to exit is the definition of the ego. It's all about not knowing, not fully experiencing. Nurture this wisdom aspect of yourself, this ability to see... Learning to stay and to live with a tender heart. Catching yourself saying the negative things, hear it and even repeat it so that it becomes absurd or ridiculous or even heartbreaking ("No one will ever love me...")... rejoice that you have the wisdom to actually see that.