

# **TRUE PEACE BEGINS WITH THE OBSERVATION AND ACCEPTANCE OF OUR OWN VIOLENCE**

Summary of Pema Chödrön's book:  
"Practicing peace in times of war"  
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The origin of anger, violence, or war, stands always at the level of a kind of inner tension. A fact, a word, an event, will cause a closure of our heart and a runaway of our thoughts in a chain reaction. This inflexibility leads us to dogmas and up to fundamentalism.

We are basically unable to observe ourselves in these situations. Yet, in general, we function in mirror image to those against whom all our grievances are directed. This is where we have to start: the observation of our attitude allows us to choose not to take the path, not to fall back into the automatism that punctuates our journey. This choice requires the courage to face fear. For, stopping the motor from these chain reactions creates a deep malaise, which, if we are able to go through it, leads to appeasement, and opening of the heart.

When we recognize ourselves as the carrier of what we condemn precisely in the other, we open the door of empathy. We understand then that our fears, our dogmatism, our fundamentalism, our rigidity, make us suffer as much as we can suffer from oppression and injustice. Both facets are part of the same coin. And stopping the process on one side stops the spiral of violence.

According to Pema Chödrön, patience is the antidote to aggression. It allows us not to enter the infernal circle of the response to aggression. Because the counterattack does not reduce, but amplifies the pain of aggression, it does not reduce anger either.

The patience, on the contrary, makes it possible to shift the glance, to stop the automatism. It also refuses to be trapped by the urgency. When stopping, listening to our feelings, we take the path of appeasement. It is not an easy path, but it brings beyond our own peace, for ourselves and for all.

Pema Chödrön expresses that it requires a lot of intrepidity. By putting ourselves on hold, we learn to accept to face anger, ours, and the pain inherent in it. This waiting, this refusal to use our automatisms, makes it possible to cultivate patience. And nothing prevents us to avoid to go through this state: no shortcut, cure, lifesaver.

But this ability to go through this, allows us to access something else. In addition to the choice that becomes possible between the spiral of aggression and peace; patience leads to a new look, to more lucidity.

By dropping our armor, refusing to fight back, we are led to face our vulnerability. And lucidity in the face of our own vulnerability, leads to a form of indulgence, even humor, towards oneself, but also towards others. In a way, patience leads us to discover a dimension of ourselves. In discovering it in ourselves, we discover it also in others, and make grow our indulgence, our benevolence, towards them.

Pema Chödrön introduces the Tibetan term of "Shenpa" which designates a concept wrongly identified in the West, the moment when, during an event (reproach addressed to us, missteps, failure), whatever its size; we get trapped, feeling uncomfortable or frustrated. And, if we are not aware of what is happening to us, the impulse to act or react to the event leads to automatic behaviors. This discomfort and agitation correspond to a deep insecurity. Refraining from acting can be likened to refusing to react when itching. To avoid being carried away by the shenpa, Pema Chödrön suggests the meditation, getting back to the present moment, immobility in irritation, learning patience.

It is also possible to learn how to identify the shenpa in others; and, in benevolence and patience, adapt the conversation wisely - this being called "prajna" - so as to avoid creating an escalation and also to calm things down.

The times when we give in to the itching, also constitute a learning a posteriori, by the reflection, by recalling the emotions, in order to manage to overcome them.

Pema Chödrön defines four stages of this process: recognizing the shenpa, refraining from acting, relaxing, and finally deciding to permanently interrupt this dynamic. In this way we conserve our energy and expand our perspectives, our consciousness.

The hard reality of life (mournings, frustrations, confrontations, pains, ...) is inevitable. But this is not where misfortune comes from, it comes from our search to escape from it. But suffering is at the origin of many lessons: questioning, empathy with those who live the same, humility before life. The difficulties and sufferings are chances for evolution, for transformation. The search for happiness at any price is a prison. To go through suffering by accepting it, by being present to it, gives access to an inner force. The reaction of flight in front of threat, pain, anger, brings us to rigidity. We build walls of protection around us in front of all these situations, which enclose us rather than free us from them. Learning to recognize our protection systems is the path which will bring us to dismantle them. Meditation, the practice of patience, and the ability to recognize the shenpa, are the means to get there. This learning requires a training to be attentive, to remain open to the difficulty of observing oneself.

To help ourselves, Pema Chödrön presents the Buddhist notion of bodhicitta, which consists in wanting to get better and wanting the world to get better; these two things being part of a single concept.

Relative bodhicitta concerns the benevolence and the attention that we pay to ourselves, in all the dimensions, and to all the parts of ourselves. It is about an unconditional love, which does not stimulate the problematic parts of oneself, but accepts and loves them without shame, nor guilt, but also without limit.

When we flee parts of ourselves, it will force us to flee from situations that may expose these parts to other people. In our relationships, access to some form of intimacy with others, will sooner or later reveal the less visible parts of us. If they are parts that we do not accept from ourselves, we will have to flee these situations. The skill is then to refuse to flee in order to learn to love ourselves as we are. By cultivating this capacity to look at ourselves lucidly, by loving ourselves unconditionally, we learn compassion. In other words: we learn to accept in the other what we accept in ourselves. By knowing how to love a person, we become able to love millions of people.

Absolute bodhicitta goes a step further. It is the opening of the heart, the capacity of unconditional love towards the world, beyond judgments and prejudices. We arrive at such a level by training. It begins by observing our states of mind (or moods), then by not letting ourselves be trapped by them, and by accepting the suffering inherent in not fleeing them; we then can overcome fears and pains, and so, by raising, we help to reduce the suffering in the world.

When we manage to avoid the shenpa, when we accept to feel insecurity and anger, and to observe our moods without posing an immediate act; we are then able to avoid escalation. But it is also possible to accompany this with a vow that this attitude affects others who suffer in the same way, by feeling compassion for them. It is even possible to practice this out of situation, by visualizing a feeling of aversion, for example. Practice leads this aversion to dissolve. It is therefore not a question of fleeing the discomfort, neither of seeking it, but of going through it, and thus gaining access to a new force, an enlarged consciousness.

If we consider this learning on a global level, and also that what we are experiencing now is the consequence of our actions of the past; by working on ourselves in compassion, we sow the seeds of a future peace in the world. No matter how long it takes, the important thing is to act now in the right direction. Changes made on ourselves and abroad create then a new culture.

When we don't get trapped, and allow ourselves a pause rather than react: we burn the seeds of

aggression. At the same time we open ourselves to an enlarged reality and work for a better world. When all our seeds of aggression will be burned, we will radiate trust, authenticity, we will be of a pleasant presence. For if we love ourselves, without shame, without guilt, and advance in safety, nourishing compassion for our neighbors, unable to reproach them for what we no longer reproach ourselves; then nobody will be able to feel in danger with us.

Pema Chödrön proposes, when we move away from tension and cultivate compassion, to simplify things. Accepting what is, without asking ourselves a thousand questions, and going through, beginning doing things differently, participating in this new culture, for ourselves and for the whole planet.

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