

Making Friends with Oneself

Meditation master Pema Chödrön explains how to be gentle on ourselves when we're struggling with our practice.

By [Pema Chödrön](#)



Pema Chödrön | Photo by Molly Nudell

Whenever we practice meditation, it is important to try to refrain from criticising ourselves about how we practice and what comes up in our practice. This would only be training in being hard on ourselves! I want to emphasise the importance of maintaining an atmosphere of unconditional friendliness when you practice and as you take your practice out into the world. We can practice for a lot of years—I know many people who have practiced for countless years, decades even—and somewhere along into their umpteenth year, it dawns on them that they haven't been using that practice to develop lovingkindness for themselves. Rather, it's been somewhat aggressive meditation toward themselves, perhaps very goal-oriented. As someone said, "I meditated all those years because I wanted people to think I was a good Buddhist." Or, "I meditated all those years out of a feeling of *I should do this, it would be good for me.*" And so naturally we come to meditation with the same attitudes with which we come to everything. I've seen this with students time and time again, and it is very human.

Rather than letting this be something to feel bad about, you can discover who you are at your wisest and who you are at your most confused. You get to know yourself in all your aspects: at times completely sane and openhearted and at other times completely messed up and bewildered. We are all at times a basket case. Meditation gives you the opportunity to get to know yourself in all those aspects. Judging ourselves for how our practice is going or what might be coming up for us

during meditation is a kind of subtle aggression toward ourselves.

The steadfastness we develop in meditation is a willingness to stay. It may seem silly, but meditation actually isn't too unlike training a dog! We learn to stay. When you're thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, you "stay." When you're worried about what's going to happen on Monday, you "stay." It's a very lighthearted, compassionate instruction. It is like training the dog in the sense that you can train the dog with harshness and the dog will learn to stay, but if you train it by beating it and yelling at it, it will stay and it will be able to follow that command, but it will be extremely neurotic and scared. As long as you give a very clear command in the way that the dog was trained, it will be able to follow it. But add in any kind of unpredictability or uncertainty, and the poor animal just becomes confused and neurotic.

Or you can train the dog with gentleness. You can train the dog with gentleness and kindness, and it produces a dog that can also stay and heel and roll over and sit up and all of these things—but the dog is flexible and playful and can roll with the punches, so to speak. Personally, I prefer to be the second kind of dog. This staying, this perseverance, this loyalty that comes with meditation—it's all very gentle or compassionate in its motivation. This gentle approach to yourself in meditation is called *maitri*. This is translated as "lovingkindness," or just "love." In terms of meditation, we learn to be kind, loving, and compassionate toward ourselves.

I teach about maitri a lot, and it is often misunderstood as some kind of self-indulgence, as if it is just about feeling good and being self-concerned. People will often think that that's what I mean by maitri. But it's somewhat subtle what maitri is and what it isn't. For example, you might say that taking a bubble bath or getting a workout at the gym is maitri. But on the other hand, maybe it isn't, because maybe it's some kind of avoidance; maybe you are working out to punish yourself. On the other hand, maybe going to the gym is just what you need to relax enough to go on with your life with some kind of lightheartedness. Or it might be one of your 65 daily tactics to avoid reality. You're the only one who knows. So it's important to be clear about what maitri means and not to come away with a misunderstanding of maitri as some kind of indulgence, which actually weakens us and makes us less able to keep our heart and mind open to ourselves and the difficulties of our life. I often use this definition: maitri strengthens us. One of the qualities of maitri is steadfastness, and that's developed through meditation. So through boredom, through aches, through indigestion, through all kinds of disturbing memories, to edgy energy, to peaceful meditation, to sleepiness, it's steadfastness. You sit with yourself, you move closer to yourself, no matter what's going on. You don't try to get rid of anything—you can still be sad or frustrated or angry. You recognise your humanity and the wide gamut of emotions you might be feeling.

When we cultivate maitri toward ourselves, we are also generating equanimity. Equanimity means we are able to be with ourselves and our world without getting caught in

“for” and “against,” without judging things as “right” or “wrong,” without getting caught up in opinions and beliefs and solidly held views about ourselves and our world. Unconditional friendliness is training in being able to settle down with ourselves, just as we are, without labelling our experience as “good” or “bad.” We don’t need to become too dramatic or despairing about what we see in ourselves.

If you could see clearly for one week, and then—boom! —all your bad habits were gone, meditation would be the best-selling thing on the planet. It would be better than any drug, any spa, any hammock on a gorgeous island. It would be *the optimum thing* if you could just see these habits, and just through one week or even one year of clear seeing and perseverance, then be entirely free of suffering. But we have been developing our habits for a very, very, very long time. However many years old you are, that’s how old those habits are. And if you have a belief in reincarnation, you are looking at many more years with these habits!

This is your chance. This little, short human life that you have is your opportunity. Don’t blow it. Think about how you want to use this time. Meditation is a patient process of knowing that gradually over time, these habits are dissolving. We don’t actually get rid of anything. We are just steadfast with ourselves, developing clearer awareness and becoming honest about who we are and what we do. In basic sitting practice, we befriend ourselves and we cultivate maitri toward ourselves. As the days, months, and years of our meditation practice pass, we also find that we’re feeling more and more

lovingkindness toward others and the world as well. When I was a young student of meditation, I received a lot of encouragement from my teacher. He always referred to unconditional friendliness as “making friends with oneself.” This felt tricky for me, because I always saw and felt things within myself that I wanted to avoid, things that were embarrassing or painful. I felt like I was making enemies with myself, because so much of this difficult material would surface during my meditation. My teacher said that making friends with myself meant seeing everything inside me, and not running away or turning my back on it. Because that’s what real friendship is. You don’t turn your back on yourself and abandon yourself, just the way you wouldn’t give up on a good friend when their darker sides began to show up. When I became friends with my body, my mind, and my transient emotions, and when I was able to comfortably settle into myself more and more (and remember, this takes time), then staying in the present moment, in all situations, became more possible for me to do. I was able in meditation to return to my breath and stop beating myself up.

I still have meditation sessions when I think or stress or deal with heavy emotion the whole time. It’s true. However, after all these years, I’m definitely a lot more settled, you’ll be glad to know. Unlike before, the thoughts and emotions don’t throw me. If I sit down and my mind is going wild or I’m worried about something, I can still touch in to a settledness that I feel with my mind and my body and my life. It’s not necessarily because things are going so great. Life, as you well know, is a

continuous succession: it's great, it's lousy, it's agreeable, it's disagreeable; it's joyous and blissful, and other times it's sad. And being with that, being with this continual succession of agreeable and disagreeable with an open spirit, open heart, and open mind, that's why I sit to meditate.



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