

# Five Pieces of Wisdom from Pema Chödrön

In honour of the American Buddhist nun's birthday, here are five of her teachings one of the first Americans to be fully ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun, celebrated her 87th birthday this week.

Born Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in 1936 in New York City, Ani Pema—*ani* is an honorific given to Tibetan Buddhist nuns—was drawn to the Buddhist path in the early 1970s. In 1972, she became a student of the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and two years later she received the nun's novice ordination from His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa. At the request of the Karmapa, she received full bhikshuni ordination in a Chan Buddhist lineage in 1981.

As a global spiritual leader and best-selling author, Ani Pema is revered for her accessible teachings on compassion and facing fear, pain, and uncertainty. In honour of her birthday, here is a selection of her timeless wisdom.

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## [Advice on knowing how to fail](#)

“Sometimes you experience failed expectations as heartbreak and disappointment, and sometimes you feel rage. But at that time, instead of doing the habitual thing of labelling yourself a ‘failure’ or a ‘loser’ or thinking there is something wrong with you, you could get curious about what is going on... If there is a lot of ‘I am bad. I am terrible,’ simply notice that and soften up a bit. Instead say, ‘What am I feeling here? Maybe what is happening is not that I am failure—maybe I am just hurting.’”

## [How to develop Genuine compassion](#)

“When taking care of ourselves is all about me, it never gets at the unshakable tenderness and confidence that we'll need when everything falls apart. When we start to develop maitri for ourselves—unconditional acceptance of ourselves—then we're really taking care of ourselves in a way that pays off. We feel more at home with our own bodies and minds

and more at home in the world. As our kindness for ourselves grows, so does our kindness for other people.”

### **How to live beautifully with uncertainty**

“Anxiety makes us feel vulnerable, which we generally don’t like. Vulnerability comes in many guises. We may feel off balance, as if we don’t know what’s going on, don’t have a handle on things. We may feel lonely or depressed or angry. Most of us want to avoid emotions that make us feel vulnerable, so we’ll do almost anything to get away from them. But if instead of thinking of these feelings as bad, we could think of them as road signs or barometers that tell us we’re in touch with groundlessness, then we would see the feelings for what they really are: the gateway to liberation, an open doorway to freedom from suffering, the path to our deepest well-being and joy. We have a choice.”

### **Allowing emotions to move through you**

“Our emotions have a lot of mental conversation—and, in my experience, it is often hard to discern between what is the thought and what is the emotion. In any given sitting period, in any given half hour of our lives, there are a lot of things that come and go. But we don’t need to try so hard to sort it all out. We don’t have to attach so much meaning to what arises, and we also don’t have to identify with our emotions so strongly. All we need to do is allow ourselves to experience the energy—and in time it will move through you. It will. But we need to experience the emotion—not think about the emotion. It’s the same thing that I’ve been talking about with the breath: experiencing the breath going in and out, trying to find a way to breathe in and out without thinking about the breath or conceptualising the breath or watching the breath.”

### **The first step in pulling ourselves out of despair**

“The reason we often start to go downhill with losing heart is that we allow ourselves to get hooked by our emotions. When we get hooked—when we get really angry, resentful, fearful, or selfish—we start to go a little unconscious. We lose our awareness of what we’re doing with our body, speech, and mind. In this state, it’s all too easy to let ourselves spiral downward. The first step in pulling yourself up is to notice and acknowledge when you’re going unconscious. Without doing that, nothing

can get better for you. How could you change anything if you're not aware of what's going on?"