

OBSTACLES AS OUR TEACHERS

BY PEMA CHODRON



I'd like to talk about the notion that obstacles can be our teachers. First, I want to discuss the whole logic of precepts in terms of relating to obstacles. Precepts have to do with simplifying. It's like having a large white canvas. Because it is so simple, you notice when even the tiniest speck of dust lands on it. You take a ballpoint pen and make a tiny dot and everyone can see it, as opposed to the usual situation of a canvas with a lot going on. On a busy canvas, you couldn't find that dot if you searched with a magnifying glass for a long time. Simplifying has a lot of power to teach you about yourself.

The whole notion of obstacles is just from our point of feeling that we've been intruded upon. Nevertheless, it causes a great deal of pain. We can feel like we're wearing dark glasses, ear muffs, layers of mittens and boots and that we don't experience our existence at all. The obstacle creates in all of us here, and in many people in the world, a great longing to figure out how to be free of that sense of separateness. You want to hear the birds singing, to taste your coffee. You want to feel fully alive and you aren't, so you call that "obstacle."

From the point of view of anyone who's pretty well or completely woken up, there really aren't any obstacles. When you look out of your eyes at the world, it seems rugged and smooth, bitter and sweet, hard and soft, fiery and cool, but you don't consider that a problem, but as reality. Precepts is like ground logic and it pervades the mind of meditation. It's the logic of simplifying things down to a point where you can see clearly, and allowing a lot of space so that insight or self-awareness can occur. If there's silence, you hear the birds.

The interesting thing is that even if there's a silence, sometimes you still don't hear the birds, because there's so much noise in your head. From the very compassionate and wise viewpoint of the Dharma, the way to work with an obstacle is not the way we usually proceed: "I hate this situation! I wish it would go away. If it weren't for my mind, my meditation would be perfect. If I jog every morning, I will be better than I am now. If I meditate well, I will be better than I am now."

This is a subtly aggressive attitude toward ourselves and reality. From the compassionate and intelligent viewpoint of the Dharma, to work with an obstacle is to become intimate with it. You can't get rid of ego, you look at it. You become very intimate with yourself and your world, but it begins with your own mind. So the logic of precepts is to simplify things.

Traditionally, this is referred to as "refraining from causing harm" or "refraining from continuing the chain reaction." Precepts acknowledge that all kinds of things occur in the mind. For example, you would like to punch that person right in the nose. You would really like to gossip and slander them, or post their name on a list in the hallway. You would like to harm them through your actions and speech. Everyone has these feelings.

This basic logic, the ground of discovery or of being truly inquisitive, is to simplify things so that you can see what occurs in your mind. The trick is to see it as a pathway towards developing loving-kindness towards yourself and others, rather than as a pathway to self-denigration. Meditation is very helpful. But precepts have to do with either ceasing to cause harm through your actions or through speech. They are considered broken only by the act of breaking them. You don't break the precept of lying unless somebody believes you. You don't break the precept of killing unless you really wanted to kill and the being is dead. The same is true of the precepts about sexual misconduct, drinking, stealing and drug abuse.

Begin With Not Harming

The way I have been taught about precepts is to begin with simply not harming. This goes a long way toward reducing chaos in your life and in the lives of others. Things are a lot simpler if you don't punch the guy in the nose, because punching him starts off a whole chain reaction of emotional upheav-



Photo by Sonia Alexander

val on everyone's part, as we all know.

Maybe you're a person who has punched others quite often. It's a habitual pattern. You grew up in a family where everyone punched. To keep the precept, you feel as if you would have to tie your hands down, because punching is so habitual. The point is, you learn a lot from the arising of the impulse, from the longing to complete that act. What is it that comes up in you that makes you want to act? Insight or self-discovery is actually the whole idea.

There's another important point in precepts, about authority figures. No one tells you that you have to do this. In fact the whole logic of monasticism is that more than anything, you want to find out how it is that you keep yourself deaf and dumb, now you keep circling around the same old things year after year. In the process, you don't discover exactly how, but you become so familiar with yourself that the insight itself is what brings freedom and opening and softening.

The important thing is that no one tells you that you have to do this. Keeping precepts comes from a real desire to know. Meditation can also be looked at in this way, like a mirror. It's as if someone videotaped you all day long and at night you had to sit down and look at yourself. Meditation is your most compassionate and loving friend, rather than your critic. There's no way for human evolution to flourish and go forward into the unknown, without people becoming very familiar, in an unjudging way, with how things are in the moment.

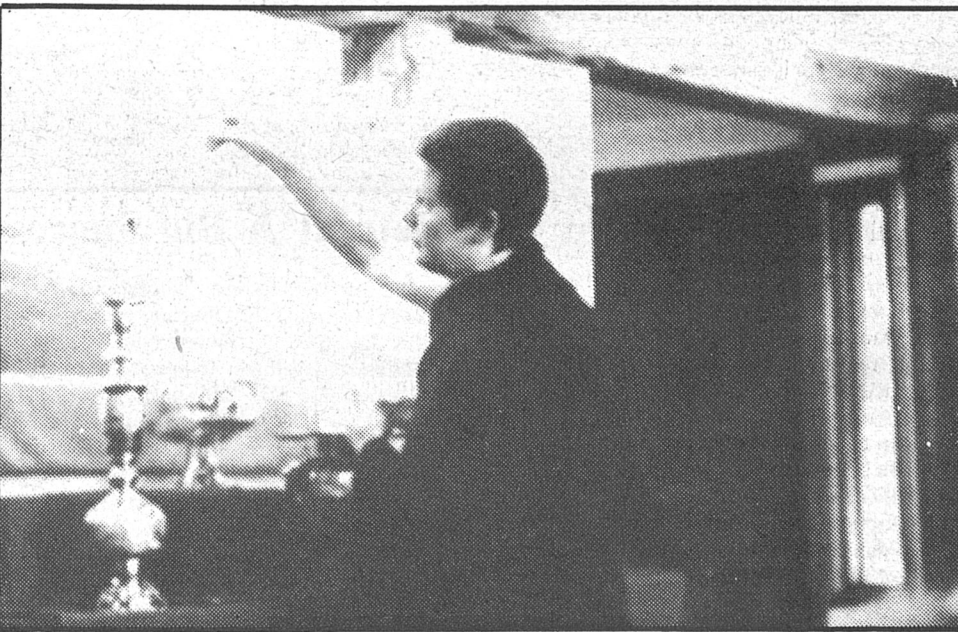


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Usually the kind of "do not's" of the precepts—do not steal, do not kill, do not lie, do not have sex, do not drink—sound like your parent putting candy on the table and saying "Don't eat it." You long to eat it. It seems right to eat it. And as soon as the parent goes away, you do eat it. It's like a big lid put on top of you that just makes you mischievous and resentful.

Poison On The Table

Precepts are actually like someone putting poison on the table and saying "Don't eat it." You wish to find out how to not eat it, because if you do eat it, you will suffer. You might actually eat it, hopefully only a little, in order to discover that it is poison. But the whole idea is, that it is poison which causes suffering to you and therefore you want to find out how not to perpetuate suffering for yourself and others.

That's the precept logic: wanting to know. The result is simplifying and some kind of tamed quality or personal harmony which is based on coming up against all one's sharp points. But if you limit your activity, you don't immediately plunge into tranquillity. In fact, you begin to come up against all those yearnings to act out. This can be very uncomfortable, but you begin to want to experience the discomfort just so that you will understand. Then as you come up against one sharp point after another, you don't consider it bad news. As Trungpa Rinpoche once said, "The bad news is good news." You're glad to see the news.

Obstacles as teacher: sometimes I also say, poison as medicine. I used the metaphor of a large white canvas, but sometimes I use the metaphor of being in a tight spot. It's the same. Things get very clear when you're cornered. When things are simplified, you always know whether you're on the dot or off the dot.

If someone says, "Be mindful of your breath as it goes out, and let that be the object of your meditation," you notice that

to be insight, real clear seeing. Another way of expressing this is to talk about the ripening of loving-kindness towards oneself. Loving-kindness has two very important elements. One is a sense of softness, gentleness, not judging. For instance, in meditation technique we're instructed to notice the tone of voice we use when we label the activity "thinking." Sometimes you say it as if it's the enemy. Bang! Like shooting clay pigeons, you want to rid yourself of thoughts. When this occurs, we're instructed to have a sense of humor about it and say "thinking" with warmth and goodheartedness, so that we aren't engaged in a struggle against ourselves. It's more a sense of developing a good relationship with oneself, based on that softness.

The second and equally important element of loving-kindness (like the second wing of a bird) is precision, accuracy. This friendship with oneself isn't based on wishful thinking, or wanting to be better than we are. It's like the relationship with people who are your closest friends. You've been through a lot with them. You know their qualities and you don't have a romantic notion about them. The ground is insight, and it's based on sympathy for oneself based on that insight. In that kind of space, your mind can relax and you don't need this defensiveness of the ego structure. You can relax and let things touch you just as they do, without the sense that they're for you or against you, and without feeling that you either have to run and hide or develop a new weapon, or find a way to make a nice thing last forever.

In the beginning, the middle and the end, "obstacle" so-called is a great teacher. It shows you about your own humanity. It shows you how you can perpetuate suffering, and also how you can reduce chaos, your personal chaos and that of the world, through insight. It's like the foundation of a building from which things can begin to develop.

When you start meditation, you begin to see things much more vividly, like that dot on the white canvas. Someone once told me that this was a process of making friends with yourself. Instead, I saw this dreadful stuff and it felt more like becoming my own enemy. That's the point where you can remember that you're not just learning about yourself. In learning about your own jealousy, you're learning about the jealousy of all the human beings who ever lived, are living now or will ever live. You don't have a trite notion of how some philosophical view or an enlightenment weekend will make it all go away. Gradually, you begin to appreciate why other people do what they do.

When my children were young, I first understood why people beat their children. Before that, I had read dreadful things in the newspapers and wondered how anyone could do those things. Suddenly, there I was with my two year old and I understood. Same thing with crimes of passion. I began to understand why people burn down buildings, rape people, why all the painful things happen in the world. It comes from those very same feelings in your heart when you want to do those same things, no matter what they are.

Bite Your Tongue

Your feeling might be quite civilized. Maybe you just want to say what a mean person somebody is. Or maybe they're getting ahead and you want to pass on a little dig that they said, with the intent of slandering them. You know it takes all you can do to bite your tongue. It's that very same kind of little yearning to harm which causes people to do all the things that create chaos in the world. It happens in the individual heart, spreads to families, communities, nations, the whole world and then to the universe.

Q: So it's the motivation behind the action that counts?

Pema Chodron: If you're willing to work with just not causing harm, you realize that it's certainly possible to break the precepts at the "outer" level, but you can never break them at the level of mind. Your motivation is the main thing. When you begin to understand your own motivation, it's like

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discovering the whole world. You begin to see why people do what they do, and your compassion isn't just some do-gooder thing like "I'm going to be nice," which inevitably leads to resentment. Your compassion is based on gut level understanding.

When you also understand it isn't necessary to perpetuate that kind of suffering, then your sympathy grows even greater. Your own motivation for practice is to help other people. You may feel that your own understanding is slight, but you realize that you can act and speak out of that understanding. Your motivation is not just based on wanting personal security or getting things comfortable for yourself, or wanting to make life certain and sure. Your motivation becomes wanting to find out the truth and to open up to the whole universe as it is, not as you want it, on your terms.

You could say that the ground is insight, and the path is a sense of beginning to take a genuinely compassionate attitude, some genuine understanding of other people. You realize if you didn't have your obstacles, you would never understand anything. This immediately changes your whole attitude about a sense of "problem" with yourself. It's not at all the same as saying, "Therefore I'm not going to just indulge in my problem," or "I'm going to continue being jealous for the rest of my life."

There's a sense of the richness of the whole process. There's a background of space in which things are always arising and you can really taste it all. Your appetite for life begins to grow. Because of insight and compassion, your discrimination becomes non-discriminating. You'll eat anything, at least once. The metaphor for this is that peacocks eat poison and then have beautiful tails. It's one of the images for a Bodhisattva. You could never eat poison if you didn't first understand it.

That loud sense of "I" or "me" or "I want it" is like a little stronghold. I feel it physically in my body, as if I were a statue carved in stone, when I get so solid about my point of view. When you become sensitive to that solidity, you can understand what renunciation is. For the sake of everyone, you want to let go of holding onto yourself.

As consciousness evolves, obstacles become fuel. They are the very things that blast you into realization. They poke you, prick you, trap you, burn you, freeze you. That's when it's said that you don't need a teacher. Everything in the world becomes your tutor, teaching you all the time about how you close off and how you can open up, how you pretend you're a separate entity and how you realize you aren't.

It is common for everyone committed to the spiritual journey to have an appetite for wanting to live fully. You begin to respect the fact that things don't get simpler, but get more vivid and pointed. The separation between you and the world ceases to be very wide, maybe ceases to exist at all. When something's hot, it is really hot and burns you up. Fire burns you up, wind blows you

into a million pieces, water drowns you, and earth buries you. You're just not there anymore. At the same time, fire warms you as it has never warmed you before. The wind in the trees is like hearing the sound of eternity. The earth is your witness, and water is always moving and fluid and endless. You are inseparable from all these things.

As a practitioner on the path and not a realized person, obstacles always still seem like obstacles, but you begin to have a different appetite for them. You're very glad to see that you still have a very small, mean mind, because you don't want it and you're never going to be free of it if you don't see it. It is said that the mark of an enlightened person is a great sense of humor, that without a sense of humor you can never become enlightened. This is encouragement to not just consider all the injustice in the world as a simple matter, and if you got rid of it, it wouldn't be there anymore. There's always going to be more. That's part of the balance. From a historical perspective, some of the worst things and some of the best things have had very unpredictable results.

Everyone has to ask questions forever, but don't be resentful if no one answers your question. No one will ever really answer your question. That's the First Noble Truth. No one can answer it, because you have to discover it for yourself. That's what the Buddha taught. All contemplative people know that. You get inspiration from everything.

I recently made the friendship of an old Native American man whom I respected enormously. In a rather naive way I asked him, "What has been your greatest teacher

in life?" He reflected for a while and then said, "Ants. You can learn a lot from ants." □



Photo by Sonia Alexander

(Ane Pema Chodron is the director of Gampo Abbey, a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastery recently opened on Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. One of the first women in North America to become a Buddhist nun, she was ordained as a novice nun by His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa in 1973 and became a fully ordained nun in 1981. She has been a student of Vajracarya, Ven Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, for 12 years.)

Last summer at Yosemite I lent a boy my 4 x 5 camera. He said, "What do I do with this now?" and I said, "Unscrew it and find out for yourself." Why shouldn't he learn how to collapse a camera? Why should I teach him that? You mustn't treat a child as if he's a nitwit; tell him some-

thing and let him go at it. I don't believe we do enough self-education.

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