

**Aus dem Buch von Pema Chödrön „When Things Fall Apart“ Shambhala Publications**

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## **Not Causing Harm**

Not causing harm obviously includes not killing or robbing or lying to people. It also includes not being aggressive - not being aggressive with our actions, our speech, or our minds. Learning not to cause harm to ourselves or others is a basic Buddhist teaching on the healing power of nonaggression.

Not harming ourselves or others in the beginning, not harming ourselves or others in the middle, and not harming ourselves or others in the end is the basis of enlightened society. This is how there could be a sane world. It starts with sane citizens, and that is us. The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.

The ground of not causing harm is mindfulness, a sense of clear seeing with respect and compassion for what it is we see. This is what basic practice shows us. But mindfulness doesn't stop with formal meditation. It helps us relate with all the details of our lives. It helps us see and hear and smell, without closing our eyes or our ears or our noses. It's a lifetime's journey to relate honestly to the immediacy of our experience and to respect ourselves enough not to judge it.

As we become more wholehearted in this journey of gentle honesty, it comes as quite a shock to realize how much we've blinded ourselves to some of the ways in which we cause harm. Our style is so ingrained that we can't hear when people try to tell us, either kindly or rudely, that maybe we're causing some harm by the way we are or the way we relate with others. We've become so used to the way we do things that somehow we think that others are used to it too.

It's painful to face how we harm others, and it takes a while. It's a journey that happens because of our commitment to gentleness and honesty, our commitment to staying awake, to being mindful. Because of mindfulness, we see our desires and our aggression, our jealousy and our ignorance. We don't act on them; we just see them. Without mindfulness, we don't see them.

The next step is refraining. Mindfulness is the ground; refraining is the path. Refraining is one of those uptight words that sound repressive. Surely alive, juicy, interesting people would not practice refraining. Maybe they would sometimes re-frain, but not as a lifestyle. In this context, however, refraining is very much the method of becoming a dharmic person. It's the quality of not grabbing for entertainment the minute we feel a slight edge of boredom coming up. It's the practice of not immediately filling up space just because there's a gap.

Once I was given an interesting meditation practice that combined mindfulness

and refraining. We were told just to notice what our physical movements were when we felt uncomfortable. I began to notice that when I felt uncomfortable, I did things like pull my ear, scratch my nose or head when it didn't itch, or straighten my collar. I made all kinds of little, jittery movements when I felt like I was losing ground. Our instruction was not to try to change anything, not to criticize ourselves for whatever we were doing, but just to see what we did.

Noticing how we try to avoid it is a way to get in touch with basic groundlessness. Refraining - not habitually acting out impulsively - has something to do with giving up entertainment mentality. Through refraining, we see that there's something between the arising of the craving - or the aggression or the loneliness or whatever it might be - and whatever action we take as a result. There's something there in us that we don't want to experience, and we never do experience, because we're so quick to act.

Underneath our ordinary lives, underneath all the talking we do, all the moving we do, all the thoughts in our minds, there's a fundamental groundlessness. It's there bubbling along all the time. We experience it as restlessness and edginess. We experience it as fear. It motivates passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and pride, but we never get down to the essence of it.

Refraining is the method for getting to know the nature of this restlessness and fear. It's a method for settling into groundlessness. If we immediately entertain ourselves by talking, by acting, by thinking - if there's never any pause - we will never be able to relax. We will always be speeding through our lives. We'll always be stuck with what my grandfather called a good case of the jitters. Refraining is a way of making friends with ourselves at the most profound level possible. We can begin to relate with what's underneath all the bubbles and burps and farts, all the stuff that comes out and expresses itself as uptight, controlling, manipulative behaviour, or whatever it is. Underneath all that, there's something very soft, very tender, that we experience as fear or edginess.

Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn't want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her instructions for the battle. The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went to fear, prostrated three times, and asked: „May I have permission to go into battle with you?“ Fear said: „Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission.“ Then the young warrior said: „How can I defeat you?“ Fear replied: „My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don't do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can even be convinced by me. But if you don't do what I say, I have no power.“ In that way, the student warrior learned how to defeat fear.

This is how it actually works. There has to be some kind of respect for the jitters, some understanding of how our emotions have the power to run us around in circles. That understanding helps us discover how we increase our pain, how we increase our confusion, how we cause harm to ourselves. Because we have

basic goodness, basic wisdom, basic intelligence, we can stop harming ourselves and harming others. Because of mindfulness, we see things when they arise. Because of our understanding, we don't buy into the chain reaction that makes things grow from minute to expansive. We leave things minute. They stay tiny. They don't keep expanding into World War III or domestic violence. It all comes through learning to pause for a moment, learning not to just impulsively do the same thing again and again. It's a transformative experience to simply pause instead of immediately filling up the space. By waiting, we begin to connect with fundamental restlessness as well as fundamental spaciousness.

The result is that we cease to cause harm. We begin to know ourselves thoroughly and to respect ourselves. Anything can come up, anything can walk into our house; we can find anything sitting on our living-room couch, and we don't freak out. We have been thoroughly processed by coming to know ourselves, thoroughly processed by this honest, gentle mindfulness.

This process connects us with the fruition of not causing harm - fundamental well-being of our body, speech, and mind. Well-being of body is like a mountain. A lot happens on a mountain. It hails, and the winds come up, and it rains and snows. The sun gets very hot, clouds cross over, animals shit and piss on the mountain, and so do people. People leave their trash, and other people clean it up. Many things come and go on this mountain, but it just sits there. When we've seen ourselves completely, there's a stillness of body that is like a mountain. We no longer get jumpy and have to scratch our noses, pull our ears, punch somebody, go running from the room, or drink ourselves into oblivion. A thoroughly good relationship with ourselves results in being still, which doesn't mean we don't run and jump and dance about. It means there's no compulsiveness. We don't overwork, overeat, oversmoke, overseduce. In short, we begin to stop causing harm.

Well-being of speech is like a lute without strings. Even without strings, the musical instrument proclaims itself. This is an image of our speech being settled. It doesn't mean that we're controlling, uptight, trying hard not to say the wrong thing. It means that our speech is straightforward and disciplined. We don't start blurting out words just because no one else is talking and we're nervous. We don't chatter away like magpies and crows. We've heard it all; we've been insulted and we've been praised. We know what it is to be in situations where everyone is angry, where everyone is peaceful. We're at home in the world because we're at home with ourselves, so we don't feel that out of nervousness, out of our habitual pattern, we have to run at the mouth. Our speech is tamed, and when we speak, it communicates. We don't waste the gift of speech in expressing our neurosis.

Well-being of the mind is like a mountain lake without ripples. When the lake has no ripples, everything in the lake can be seen. When the water is all churned up, nothing can be seen. The still lake without ripples is an image of our minds at ease, so full of unlimited friendliness for all the junk at the bottom of the lake that we don't feel the need to churn up the waters just to avoid looking at what's there.

Not causing harm requires staying awake. Part of being awake is slowing down

enough to notice what we say and do. The more we witness our emotional chain reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain. It becomes a way of life to stay awake, slow down, and notice.

At the root of all the harm we cause is ignorance. Through meditation, that's what we begin to undo. If we see that we have no mindfulness, that we rarely refrain, that we have little well-being, that is not confusion, that's the beginning of clarity. As the moments of our lives go by, our ability to be deaf, dumb, and blind just doesn't work so well anymore. Rather than making us more uptight, interestingly enough, this process liberates us. This is the liberation that naturally arises when we are completely here, without anxiety about imperfection.

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