

Making Friends with Yourself

by Andrea Miller



Pema Chodron and the Shambhala Sun's Andrea Miller.

One of Pema Chodron's students wrote her a letter. "You talk about gentleness all the time," he began, "but secretly, I always thought that gentleness was for girls." When Ani Pema recounts this story, the retreatants - predominantly female - laugh. Unsurprisingly, once this student tried being gentle with himself, he had a change of heart. In the face of things he found embarrassing or humiliating, he realized that it takes a lot of courage to be gentle.

Ani Pema points out that practicing meditation can actually ramp up our habitual self-denigration. This is because, in the process of stabilizing the mind, we become more aware of traits in ourselves that we don't like, whether it's cruelty, cynicism, or selfishness. Then we need to look deeper, with even more clarity. When we examine our addictions, for example, we need to be able to see the sadness that's behind having another drink, the loneliness behind another joint.

This brings us to unconditional friendship with ourselves, the second quality that Ani Pema teaches is critical for waking up. As she explains it, "When you have a true friend, you stick together year after year, but you don't put your friend up on a pedestal and think that they're perfect. You two have had fights. You've seen them be really petty, you've seen them mean, and they've also seen you in all different states of mind. Yet you remain friends, and there's even something about the fact that you know each other so

well and still love each other that strengthens the friendship. Your friendship is based on knowing each other fully and still loving each other."

Unconditional friendship with yourself has the same flavor as the deep friendships you have with others. You know yourself but you're kind to yourself. You even love yourself when you think you've blown it once again. In fact, Ani Pema teaches, it is only through unconditional friendship with yourself that your issues will budge. Repressing your tendencies, shaming yourself, calling yourself bad - these will never help you realize transformation.

Keep in mind that the transformation Ani Pema is talking about is not going from being a bad person to being a good person. It is a process of getting smarter about what helps and what hurts; what de-escalates suffering and escalates it; what increases happiness and what obscures it. It is about loving yourself so much that you don't want to make yourself suffer anymore.

Ani Pema wraps up her Saturday-morning talk by taking questions. One woman who comes up to the mic says she's been on the spiritual path for a while, yet it doesn't seem to be helping her. Ani Pema - as she always does - fully engages with the questioner.

"Do you have a regular meditation practice?" she asks.

"Yes."

"And how does that feel these days?"

"It feels hurried."

"Hurried?"

"I have a child with disabilities, so meditation has to be fit in. I can't just decide to go sit down. It has to be set up."

"I get it," Ani Pema says slowly. "So, okay, that's how it is currently - uncomfortable, hurried. Things as they are." Then she comes back to what we've been talking about this morning: unconditional friendship. Ani Pema's advice is this: don't reject what you see in yourself; embrace it instead. Feeling Hurried Buddha, Feeling Cut Off from Nature Buddha, Feeling No Compassion Buddha - recognize the buddha in each feeling.