

What is the Most Important Thing?

including instructions on the Pause Practice

Tele-teaching to residents at Gampo Abbey

by Ani Pema Chödrön, March 2008

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Ani Pema: To begin with, please bring to mind why you are listening to these teachings. It is in the spirit of awakening bodhichitta which means that it is for yourself, but in the context of awakening yourself so that you can really be a loving caring person who can benefit others. So with that intention please listen to the teachings.

I thought that I would begin with a question with which you can open your discussion groups and this is a question that you have heard before but I think that you can never hear it enough. It's a contemplation really, and it's "Since death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?" So since death is certain but you really don't know how long you have to wake up, you don't know how long you have to

fulfill the potential of this precious human birth that you have. So what is the most important thing, every day of your life, every morning of your life, you could ask yourself, “As I go into this day, what is the most important thing? What is the best use of this day?” And I must say, at my age it’s kind of scary when I am going to sleep at night and I look back at the day, it seems like it passed as quickly as the snap of a finger. And I thought that’s a whole day, what did I do with it? Did I move any closer to being fully awake, being more compassionate, loving and caring? Is my mind more open? What did I actually do? And I feel how little time there is and how precious it is and how important it is how we spend it. This is really what I want us to contemplate. Everything that I say follows in this context. What is the best use of each day of our lives? Because in one very short day, each of us could become more sane, more compassionate, more in touch with the dream-like quality of the nature of reality, more in touch with tenderness, or we could bury all these qualities more deeply. We could be more in touch with solid mind and so forth.

During Yarne I taught that every time a habitual pattern gets strong, every time we feel caught up or hooked, in any way at all, any time we just realize that we are on automatic pilot where our habitual way of looking at things, our conventional way of looking at things is just all-consuming that whenever we find ourselves caught in a habitual way that rather than it being seen as a problem, we could see it an opportunity to burn up karma, that we see it as our karma just ripening and we see it as an opportunity to burn up our karma or at least weaken our karmic propensities. I gave certain practices on how to do this, what to do when you acknowledge that you are hooked that you are caught up. I

asked Susan if she would give some more of those helpful hints and I think she has given one of those talks already. Obviously acknowledging that we are caught up is a huge thing to recognize but then what to do next? We need a lot of instruction, a lot of encouragement about what to do next. When we realize that we are caught up, hooked and on automatic pilot, what to do next? That really is the practitioner's question. And one of the practices that I taught was the practice of pausing or creating a gap and I want to say more about that in this talk.

But first I want to say something about the place, the actual geographic location in which you find yourself, the shrine room in which you are sitting, the ocean, the sky, the land and the animals. I want to say something about Gampo Abbey and its land, the place where you currently reside. I would like to begin by talking about the very powerful, enlightened teachers who have been in the same shrine room that you are sitting in right now and have blessed this land by their presence. Trungpa Rinpoche, the Vidyadhara, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, was the first teacher to come and to bless the place and say it was a good place and to say that this is where we should establish the monastery which he had called Gampo Abbey. And then his son, the Sakyong, Mipham Rinpoche, and Gesar Mukpo, Sechen Kongtrul. You probably don't know this but when the Sakyong was younger he did several retreats at Gampo Abbey. I believe that he did them either in the suite or in what is now Ani Migme's room. He hiked to Pollet's Cove and spent a lot of time on top of Gampo Lhatse so he knows the land really well and has blessed it. Gesar Mukpo was here for Shedra two years ago. Shortly after the death of the 16th Karmapa, His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul visited the Abbey for a very powerful visit.

Interestingly enough at the time he visited, the Venerable Dzochen Ponlop Rinpoche was also in residence. The blessings were tangible and there were two thrones set up in the shrine room where you are sitting now and they sat on those thrones. Then they walked over to Sopa Choling and blessed Sopa Choling and gave talks and blessed all the buildings. Then his Eminence went down and blessed Hollis' house and some of the land further down the road. I remember at the time that he said it was a very powerful place and he said that he hoped to be able to return there one day to do a retreat. So maybe the young Jamgon Kongtrul will be doing a retreat at the Abbey one day invited by Tenzin. Tenzin are you there? Yes!

Of course our Abbot Venerable Kenchen Thrangu Rinpoche has blessed the Abbey many, many times and has come with such a strong motivation for the place to grow and flourish and has helped us so immensely over the years and blessed the place and made strong aspirations which he continues to do for the flourishing of monasticism in this spot. Khenpo Tsultrim has come, three times, maybe four, and Tenzin, I wanted to ask you if you would find the poem the Khenpo Tsultrim made about the Abbey that has been made into a song. The choir used to sing the song, if you would type it up and post it outside the dining room so people could see how Khenpo Tsultrim saw the Abbey as a Pure Land. He describes it in his song, he describes it as a Pure Land. Mingyur Rinpoche has visited the Abbey many times now, I forget the number of times, and blessed the Abbey. Khandro Rinpoche has visited, I think it's four times now, and blessed the Abbey. And in each case with all these teachers, they always remark on the power of the place. Khenpo Khartar Rinpoche from Karma Triyana has visited the

Abbey. The Vidyadhara's nephew, Karma Senge Rinpoche has visited the Abbey and blessed it and has done an abhisheka at the Abbey based on a terma that the Vidyadhara had left. We have also been blessed by Lady Diana, Trungpa Rinpoche's wife, and Khandro Tesyang, the Sakyong's wife, and blessed by various native American Elders. So why am I saying this? Why am I listing all of these powerful people who have visited us? It is because they have blessed the place and we can experience their blessings by pausing and being fully present at any moment. Even if they had never been here, even if all of these teachers had never been at the Abbey, even without that there is just the land itself which, when the Vidyadhara visited, he talked about that drala and werma were so strong on Cape Breton Island and this was such a powerful place with the vastness of the sea and the vastness of the sky and stillness, this silence at Gampo Abbey that you can actually hear.

I think I am saying all of this because I'm wondering how often each one of you in your daily life at the Abbey, how often do you actually connect with the blessings? How often do you connect with the vastness and the silence and the stillness? How often is that transmission of awakened mind that exists in the pores of the place, in the buildings in the air and the wind, in the sea, in the animals, how often are each one of you actually touching in? Poking your head out of your cocoon long enough to actually taste it, experience it, let it shift something in you, let it penetrate through your conventional way of looking at things? I was thinking about it and how we have tried to structure the day so that there is a lot of silence and space, which if you don't fill it up with your discursive mind and your worrying and your obsessing and your critical mindedness and all that

kind of thing, if you don't fill it up, there is time actually set aside for you to actually experience the blessing of the place. I imagine that for most of you, if not all of you, on quite a few days of your life at the Abbey, when you get up in the morning, in the early morning, when you come down, or come up if you are coming from the men's quarters, or come across the field if you are coming from the cabins, I imagine in the early morning when you stand in line to go into the shrine room, stand there listening to the gong and perhaps you are still half asleep, that your habitual mind hasn't clicked in yet and maybe you are not quite awake enough to be caught up in your conventional way of seeing things yet, as you walk over, or come down or come up to the shrine room and when you go in and you sit, I imagine that a few days, for a lot of you, the blessings and the silence are accessible to you then. If not before, then when you sit in the shrine room, before chants, and you just sit there quietly, maybe it's then that the silence dawns on you and the sacredness of the space penetrates. Maybe not, maybe you are already completely caught up in the work that you have to do that day, in the projects that you haven't finished, in worrying about something that has to be done, or hasn't been done, or a letter that you just received, or caught up in busy mind, caught up in hesitation or fear, depression or discouragement, in other words, going into the cocoon, staying in the cocoon. I'm sure that it is different from day to day, but if you have connected with the blessings of the place, the stillness of the place, with the magic, the complete magic and power of the place, maybe that feeling stays with you and you go into breakfast and it stays with you in the silence of the breakfast time and maybe as you look out the window or stand on the porch, go out to the flag poles or take a walk, as you wash your dish or whatever else that it is that you are doing, maybe that magic, that sacredness, the

expansiveness, the stillness stays with you, and then it goes with you into your morning practice and for three hours you have an opportunity to practice and maybe not only stay with the feeling but deepen it with your practice. Maybe there is some kind of continuity of the magic, of the sacredness, of the vastness, the kind of thing that you can't help but feel when you go out to the flag poles and look out across the Gulf of St. Lawrence or if you are alone in the shrine room and you go to the window and look out. Sometimes it's inescapable. One of the things that I have always noticed at the Abbey is how penetrating the weather is, how penetrating the land itself is and the animals, the calls of birds and so forth. It cuts through, it has such a cutting-through quality, cutting through the cocoon mentality. I also know from personal experience how strong the habitual mind is, the discursive mind is, the busy, worry, caught up, spaced out mind. And that's why I'm giving this talk because I want you to realize what a strong opportunity every day is and how easy it is to waste it. So maybe the experience stays with you and it deepens with your practice or maybe what's most common for most of us is that it sort of comes and goes during the practice period. But if there has been some continuity, maybe it stays with you for the mind body period which I now think is an hour and a half. So that is a time that has been set aside to unwind, to exercise, to walk, to rest, to contemplate, to allow your mind to open and to connect with where you are, with the immediacy of your experience. Connecting with the immediacy of your experience. But I am concerned that breakfast is still filled up with going to the computer, checking your email, trying to fit in a few moments of work, and mind-body hour is filled up in the same way. What I am trying to get at here is that even though the opportunity is there, it's now lunch time and there has been all that open space given to you on a silver platter.

And yet I am concerned that life at Gampo Abbey could be the same for you as it is for the life of ordinary people out in the world who are completely submerged, completely caught up and submerged and distracted by the details of their lives, from the moment they get up in the morning until they fall asleep at night, so caught up in the content, I think of it as the content of our lives, the minutia that make up a day, so caught in it, so completely self-absorbed in the job that you have to do, in the project that you have to complete that the blessings, the magic, the stillness and vastness escape you. You never, emerge from the cocoon except for when a raven calls so loudly that for a moment you stick your head out and realize Wow! Look at that ocean! Look at that sky! Look at that squirrel, whatever it might be. And so days and months, actually whole lifetimes can actually just pass us by. Longchenpa refers to it as our useless or meaningless focus on the details, on the minutia, so caught up that we don't see what is in front of our nose. He says this useless focus extends moment by moment into a continuum as he puts it, days, months, whole lives go by. My concern for each of us at the Abbey is that even though the space is there, the practice is open, what is your practice like? Do you spend your whole time just thinking about things, distracting yourself with your own mind? I know what that is like. When you are not practicing, do you spend your time in the same way, just completely lost in thought? I ask this question because this is the human predicament. This is what the Buddha recognized and what all the living teachers since then have recognized. This is what we are up against. The Abbey is a perfect place, if you are there for six months, or for the rest of your life, it's set up to help you, to support you to not get caught up but to experience the magic of this life that we have, each moment. But this is the second point, the major point that needs to be discussed. The

“Yes, but” question, which is... Yes, but I have a job to do, there is a deadline, or it is endless the amount of email that I have to deal with in the office, the amount of meals that have to be cooked by a dwindling number of cooks in the kitchen, etc., etc., How are we supposed to juggle all that we have to do in a day, in a week, in a month with what I’m saying about how we might be missing our precious opportunity. Not only do we have a precious human life, that precious human life is made up of precious human days and those precious human days are made up of precious human moments. It’s really, really important how we spend them. Just like people who live everywhere all over the world, we have jobs to do, we don’t just sit around meditating all day, and it’s designed that way, its meant to bring in the real nitty-gritty of life relationships, how we live there together. We rub up against each other. That’s intentional that we aren’t isolating ourselves off in cabins living all alone, we actually are a community living together. So that is part of what our karma is, part of our dilemma, how we work with the feelings that the relationships bring up.

And we work, we do service to support the Abbey and keep it going forward. This is intentional, this is an important part of our lives. It’s not like an extra burden we feel we have to just get through. I brought us up to lunch time, let’s talk about the afternoon. My feeling, my premise here is that if you have spent that morning, which most people in the world have no such luxury to have such a morning as you have every day, but if you have spent that morning lost in thought worrying about what you have to do in the afternoon, already starting to work on it in every little gap that you can find, then you have wasted a lot of opportunities. If the morning has been characterized at least a little bit by some

spaciousness, some openness in your mind and heart, some gap in your usual way of being all caught up, then sooner or later that is going to start to permeate the rest of the day, whether you are in the basement like Yoda and Tharpa, with no way to look out at the sky or the sea, or whether you are in an office where you can see the ocean, or you are in a room upstairs where you can see it, or Ani Palmo in her cabin where you can see the ocean and the sky and the moose or the ravens. It doesn't matter where it is that we spend our afternoons, our work time, we can still connect with the stillness and the vastness. If we haven't become accustomed to the experience of openness, if we haven't been getting any taste of that, then there is no way that the afternoon is going to be influenced, permeated, by that openness as well, that will come right into our work. So it doesn't matter whether we are practicing, or at the computer, or fixing a meal or whether we have a spatula or a hammer in our hands, or what it is that we are doing, the magic will still be there for us permeating our lives. Then, needless to say, if that begins to happen even slightly, it's not going to leave you when you leave Gampo Abbey.

Whether you are leaving permanently or for a short period of time, it will go with you in the bus or car ride down to Halifax, it will go with you into the meetings or friendships, it will go with you into the airplane, it will go with you into your visits with your family, it really doesn't matter it will stay with you. The point I'm trying to make is that it's not just at Gampo Abbey that this is available, this is available anywhere, anytime, always. But at Gampo Abbey, as we say about power spots, you are kind of given a head start, a jump start, but you have to do something. There is a certain discipline required in being open enough to receive it.

At this point I would like to refresh your experience of the pause, because this is what I really want to leave you with. I have presented what is the most important thing that you want to do with your life as the question and I have presented the dilemma. I have presented the possibility of how each day is designed at the Abbey to support you, to help you, and I have presented the dilemma which is also built into the Abbey life which is that there is a job to do and you are being asked to do it. Paden can't just space out on the vastness when the pipes are leaking. The cooks can't just decide not to cook, all the office people can't decide not to relate to all the incoming inquires and so forth. Each of us can't decide not to mentor our mentees or take care of our meditation instructees or meet with our mentors or meet with our meditation instructors. We do all of these things. Those of us who are in Shedra, we don't just not to go to class or not do the homework and we do it and it takes a lot of time. I want to leave you with a refresher on the pause practice because I think it is the practice that each of you can do. Whether you are in Shedra and don't have that morning spacious period, no matter what it is that you are doing, this is the practice that can really transform each day of your life. It's like an open doorway. The pause practice is like creating a gap, is like creating an open doorway to the sacredness of the place in which you find yourself. The vastness and the stillness and the magic of the place in which you find yourself, letting your mind relax enough and open enough and dropping the story line for a few breaths, for long enough to actually connect, to actually reconnect with exactly where you are, with the immediacy of your experience.

So let me kind of review. When you are waking up in the morning and you aren't even out of bed yet, even if you are late, even if you are running late and you are Jinpa out in the cabin or Pawo out in the cabin or Ngodrub and you are running, even while you are running, you could just look out and drop the story line and take three conscious breaths. Just be where you are! When you are standing in the line listening to the gong, just create a gap, just create a gap in your discursive mind. You can look at your hands and take three conscious breaths, you can look out the window. It doesn't matter if you look out or if you just give your full attention to a detail. You can just pause, let it be a contrast to being all caught up, let it be like popping a bubble or just a moment in time and then you just go on. So you are standing in line, you can look out the window, you can just create that gap by taking three conscious breaths and being right there with the immediacy of your experience, right there with whatever you see, with wherever your hand is resting, with whatever you are feeling. A very powerful way to do this is for just a moment to listen. Instead of sight being the predominant sense perception let sound, hearing, be the predominant sense perception. It's a very powerful way to cut through the conventional way of looking at the world. So in any moment, you can just stop and listen intently. It doesn't matter what you hear, you can just create a gap by listening intently. During your practice, while you are sitting there in the early morning, you can just create a gap. Every time you realize that you are thinking and you let the thoughts go, you are creating a gap. Every time the breath goes out, you are creating a gap. You may not always experience it that way, but the basic shamatha instruction is designed to be full of gaps. Every time that you label it as thinking, chance for a gap. Every time you breathe out, chance for a gap. In any moment you could just listen. In any moment

you could just put your full attention on the immediacy of your experience, you could look at your hand resting on your leg, or just feel your bottom sitting on the cushion or on the chair. Do you see what I mean? You can just be here! Instead of being not here, instead of being caught up, being so absorbed in thinking, planning, worrying, self-absorbed, caught up in the cocoon, cut off from your sense perceptions, cut off from the sounds and the sights, cut off from the power and magic of the moment. When you go out for a walk, do it frequently, just stop and listen. Stop and take three conscious breaths, I don't really care how you create the gap but just punctuate your life with these thought-free moments. They don't have to be thought-free minutes, just one breath, one second, punctuate it, create gaps. As soon as you do it, you realize how big the sky is, how big your mind is. This is really what I want to connect you with, this is really what I want to charge you with.

In the afternoon when you are working, I don't know how you are going to do it, it's so easy to just get consumed, particularly computers, they have a way of hypnotizing you, but have a timer, have something on your computer where you just keep creating a gap. Just keep pausing; just keep allowing for a gap. So when you are hooked, allow for a gap. Various things happen whether you are hooked or whether you are working, various things happen. One of the things that happens when you are completely wound up about something and you pause is that your natural intelligence clicks in and you have a sense of what is the right thing to do. This is one way that we experience the magic is that our own natural intelligence is always there to inform us as long as we allow a gap. As long as we are on automatic pilot, just run around by our minds and by our emotions, there is

no intelligence, it is just like a rat race and it doesn't make much difference whether its at Gampo Abbey or on the stock exchange, wherever the most busy caught up place in the world might be. So connect with the blessings, liberate yourself from the cocoon, the cocoon of self-caught upness, self-involvement, just talking to yourself all of the time, completely obsessing. Allow a gap, gap, gap. Just do it over and over and over, allow the space to realize where you are. Realize how big your mind is, realize how big the space is, that it has never gone away, that you have been ignoring it. Find a way to slow down. Find a way to relax. Find a way to relax your mind and do it often, very, very often, throughout the day continuously, not just when you are hooked but all the time. Shenpa is a lot more than a klesha attack. The root shenpa is attachment to ourselves and that is characterized by being continually caught up in discursive thought, continually self-involved with discursive plans, worries etc, etc.,

For discussion groups I would like you to bring up the question "Since death is certain but the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?" Have people discuss, go around, so that everyone will have a chance to say something. Do it in small groups and let people talk about their experience of a bigger perspective, experiencing the magic somehow or whatever it might be. Also there is being completely caught up. But the question is, what is the most important thing to do with each day? Each morning, each afternoon, each evening. I didn't take us any further than the work period, but there is another opportunity to sit and then there is the reminder of the morning chants and the evening chants. There are a lot of opportunities at Gampo Abbey, but are you availing yourself of them? Are they changing you? Are they transforming you at the core? It

doesn't matter whether you are practicing or working, there is a continuity. These gaps which I am suggesting that you just punctuate like poking holes in the clouds, poking holes in the cocoon, they can extend. They can extend so that they can permeate your entire life, and the continuity is no longer the continuity of discursive thought but it is one continual gap.

But let's be realistic about where we actually are. The first question is about what is the most important thing and then, having talked about that a bit, how to juggle that, how to balance that with the fact that we have a job to do and then we become completely submerged in the details of our lives and just stay caught in the cocoon of our feelings and our emotions and our patterns all day long. So how do we balance these? And then discuss my suggestions. This is a very, very powerful suggestion that I am making that can really transform your life. This is to create the gap, frequently, often, continuously. In that way, allow the space to connect with the sky and the ocean and the birds and the land and with the blessing in that place from all the teachers that have come there. Give yourself the chance to come out of your cocoon. Otherwise, what are we doing at Gampo Abbey? What does it mean to be a monk or a nun or a lay-person there? Is it just that we are trying to complete our jobs? The question is what is the vision behind what we are doing? Why are we cooking that meal, mending that fence or pipe or painting something? Why are we working on the computer, or answering the telephone or transcribing? What is the greater vision behind the whole thing? Why is the Abbey even there? Why did Trungpa Rinpoche want to establish a monastery on Cape Breton Island in the Shambhala tradition? Why? Ask these questions, what is the most important

thing? How can we work with our life just as it is? Morning and the afternoon being just as they are, how do we connect with, how to we bring space, how do we connect with the space, the openness of our minds? This is what I would like to ask you to do. Let this subject of pausing and connecting with the magic of your life, the power of your life, let this be the subject, along with continuing to discuss shenpa, let this be the subject, the subject of pausing, what is accessible to us when we pause? How do we use our days so that we wake up rather than go to sleep more? Let this be a subject for the mentor meetings and the meditation instruction meetings. Let this be something that you discuss together, individually with your mentor. And any mentors that aren't there like Gyatso, like Lodro Sangpo and Ani Lodro, please let them hear this talk, so that something really happens to you at Gampo Abbey. Your compassion and your ability to care for yourself and all those who you meet, people and animals, grows stronger and stronger and your ability to have some inkling of the dream-like nature of reality, that luminous emptiness of each moment begins to grow stronger and stronger. So I will leave you with this assignment. I hope that the discussion group topic is clear, that you ask the question "What is the most important thing?" You discuss how you connect and how you block it, and you talk about making a commitment to creating gaps throughout the day, each of you individually, and in any way that you think that you can support each other so that you really begin to have a greater vision behind your everyday life and it's not just caught up in mundane details like everybody else is all over the planet. So now let's share the merit and I hope that you have good success with this.