

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

A SATURN IN PISCES ELDER



by **Andrea Conlon**

Pema Chödrön is an American Buddhist nun and world-renowned spiritual teacher. She is beloved throughout the world for her spiritual teachings that focus on acceptance of our feeling states, as well as impermanence and death. It is timely to acknowledge her as a Spiritual Elder during Saturn's transit through Pisces, especially as she is approaching her third Saturn Return. While we don't have her exact birth time, there is much we can explore to link her teachings to her birth chart.

The Nodal Axis symbolizes a person's arc of development, as it outlines the major soul work of a life. I will focus on how both Pema's South Node and North Node, by sign and ruler, uncannily reflect her major teaching: Working with difficult emotions as the path of awakening and groundlessness.

Exploring Pema's evolutionary work with a natal Saturn in Pisces (ruler of her North Node) will help us orient to the collective task of Saturn transiting Pisces, for we too are navigating this passage. This task embodies themes of impermanence, groundlessness, and the ephemeral nature of our human condition. In Pema's words, "the very nature of our existence is forever in flux... What a predicament! We seem doomed to suffer simply because we have a deep-seated fear of how things really are."¹

Pema was born with five planets and the South Node of the Moon in Cancer, a rather impressive concentration of energy! One aspect of the Cancerian archetype is that of the Great Mother, which Pema powerfully embodies. To attend one of her events is to witness her love and compassion and also the effusive devotion and gratitude she receives for her teachings on how to work with difficult emotions.

The South Node in Cancer emphasizes the issues of emotional vulnerability and fear. It tells us that she came into this life with high sensitivity, perhaps a highly reactive emotional body, and the need for healing.

We do not know her Moon sign conclusively. It could be in Taurus or Gemini, although I would speculate that it is in Gemini given her power as a teacher and prolific writer. We also know that the Moon is likely out of bounds, as is her Mercury–Mars conjunction in Cancer. The conjunction is expressed as a highly energized and emotional mind and as a teacher of emotional intelligence, which adds context to her achievements as a world-renowned spiritual adept.

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Pema was born Deirdre Blomfield-Brown to an upper-middle-class family. After attending private schools, she married, had two children, divorced, married a second time, and divorced a second time. Her second husband's affair brought her to her knees.

Her chart has a partile conjunction between Venus and Pluto in Cancer. This combination is known for relational complications, and potentially, the searing pain of betrayal. Cancer is a sign that needs emotional security and trust in a relationship.

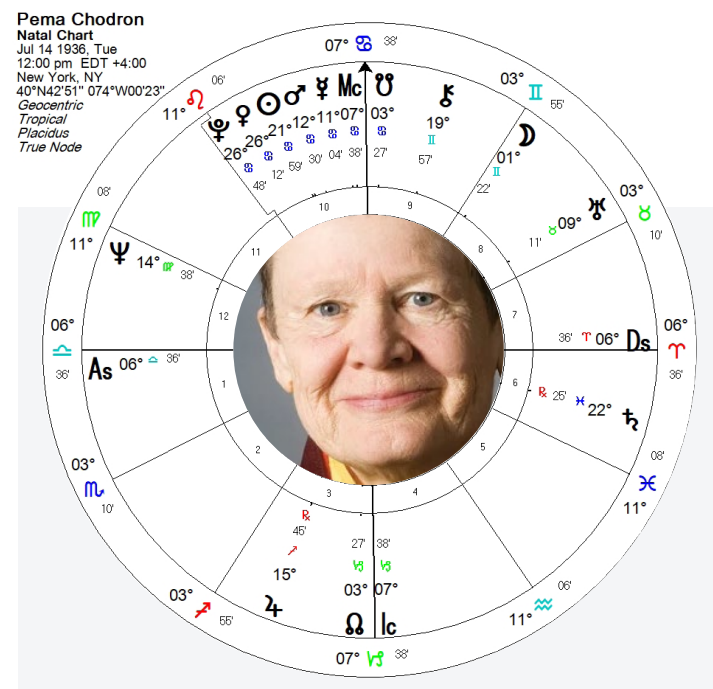
This suffering was the seed from which she began her spiritual journey. "This too seems to be a facet of Cancer: that nothing will goad the sign into open confrontation with life save deep emotional loss."²

The South Node of The Moon: The Best of Us, The Worst of Us

While the South Node reflects the difficult karma we are working with in this life, it also identifies aptitudes and strengths that can be used and given back in service. Thus, it is unwise to counsel our clients to leave the south node behind—as if that is even possible. Perhaps it is better to think of it as a storehouse that we can draw from as we work to shift toward the requirements of the North Node. This is especially true when we see many planets in the sign of the South Node. As Liz Greene has stated, we must work on both sides of the nodal axis.³

When we incarnate with a massive amount of planets in the sign of Cancer, as Pema has, work on emotional reactivity becomes central—and doubly so with the South Node in Cancer. Likewise, a great part of the spiritual path is simply coming to terms with the challenge of emotions. Pema is an exemplar in this regard, as

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her signature teachings have to do with helping us face and work through difficult feelings.

At her public events, there are countless questions from attendees asking for help with their emotional pain. Her response is always in the direction of bringing a warm and kindly *acceptance* to one's feeling states. She counsels that the surest way to keep unwanted feeling states active is to try to get rid of them!

Instead, she teaches cultivating open awareness for whatever arises without trying to change anything. What a beautiful and relieving statement and also how difficult! We might call this approach "Buddhist emotional intelligence."

Our emotions are the path of awakening. "If we want to discover our own wisdom, there's nowhere to look other than in our own neurosis."⁴ Pema has disclosed her own struggles with anxiety and panic attacks, and how she learned over time to face right into the raw fear.

We might think of this as a recent development in Buddhist psychology — to make friends with our feelings. But Pema has been teaching this for decades. It reflects her soul energy, karmic legacy, and received teachings from Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, her two main teachers.

Dzigar Kongtrul's instruction is to cut through our habitual reactions and feel the emotions *directly*. *Directly* means without commentary, without interpretation, without having a conversation in your head about what's happening. It means not regarding the emotions as adversaries but joining with them, embracing them, becoming intimate with them.⁵

Pema termed this practice of developing the courage to "feel what we feel" as *Compassionate Abiding*. Her mantra is *awareness with heart*.

Our Sameness With Others

A related theme is to cultivate the awareness of our *sameness* with others because we all have these difficult feelings.

Right now, whatever we are going through, other people are going through the same thing ... countless others are feeling disturbed by their emotions. It is never just *my* pain. Anything I feel is shared by all. When I touch anger, I know the anger of all beings. All feelings are universal, felt by all of us. We are in this sense, all in the same boat.⁶

It is a helpful transformational practice to use our emotional pain as a stepping stone to opening our hearts to others. This teaching integrates the compassion of a chart with five planets in Cancer and Saturn in Pisces. In Pema's chart, these energies are linked powerfully by a flowing trine.

Pema's primary gift to us is as a Great Mother Healer, but first came her own healing through disciplined spiritual practice. As Steven Forrest writes of the Sun in Cancer, "Ultimately I am here to be a healer of some sort — but I recognize that in order to accomplish that aim, I must first heal myself."⁷ This is a natural segue to the North Node of the Moon, "the cutting edge of our evolutionary growth."⁸ Here we find another great vector of Pema's spiritual teachings.

North Node in Capricorn

Pema's North Node of the Moon lies in Capricorn, the sign of The Elder, ruled by Saturn in Pisces. We look to Saturn, Capricorn's ruler, to fine-tune the direction of her evolutionary work. Capricorn and Saturn both require steady, persistent efforts to accomplish a Great Work.

But Saturn in Pisces is paradoxical. The planet of structure and boundaries is in a sign that dissolves boundaries and egoic attachments. Thus, Saturn in Pisces indicates the need for a disciplined spiritual practice and service to the collective. Again, we see this reflected in Pema's core teachings. "Groundlessness" is the word she uses, meaning nothing to hold onto. "It's crucial for all of us to find a practice that will help us have a direct relationship with groundlessness, with impermanence and death."⁹

Working With Impermanence and Death

Fear of death and loss is a common fixation. Making peace with impermanence the best we can is the greatest existential challenge we face. Pema would say that we must train now, by touching the fear of letting go, if we are to die with any kind of ease and grace.

Saturn's passage through Pisces is pointing us toward becoming more conscious of impermanence and the dissolving of egoic boundaries and attachments. Collectively, we are being called to align with the eternal spaciousness beyond egoic boundaries. We are also being called to awaken our love and compassion for all beings.

In recent years, Pema has made it her mission to help us face the ultimate challenge of death. "All people and all things are as transitory as clouds, and this can break our hearts. But on the absolute level, nothing dies. Life after life, our bodies come and go, but our true nature always remains the same."¹⁰ In her most recent book, *How We Live Is How We Die*, she gives practical counsel, from the perspective of the Tibetan Buddhist Bardo teachings, on how to navigate the passage of death.



PEMA CHÖDRÖN

It is striking to see the synastry between Pema and Trungpa's birth charts (below). Trungpa's three planets in Pisces conjunct Pema's Saturn in Pisces. He was a way-shower for her and powerfully activated her Saturn.

Trungpa's choice to make Pema the director of Gampo Abbey, the Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia, was a brilliant one for many reasons. She is perfectly suited to transmit his main teachings. But it was also a progressive one, as women are not often seen in higher positions in the Buddhist hierarchy. Pema Chödrön has kept Chogyam Trungpa's legacy alive on the world stage.

The Genuine Heart of Sadness

One of Trungpa's teachings was on the tender "heart of sadness," which Pema explains is a training in one's capacity to hold sadness. It seems obvious to many of us that if we are not feeling sad about the state of the world, we're not paying attention.

This, too, is the feeling tone of Saturn in Pisces, which sings its song in a minor key. In our feeling-aversive culture, sadness has been shamed and disallowed for many. Feeling sad can evoke shame in many people. It's a relief to have sadness honored and dignified for what it is—the accurate perception of our tenuous, tender human condition, which we share with all other beings.

Sadness reflects the universal impermanence of all aspects of our lives. Pema quotes the 8th-century Indian sage Shantideva: "All that I possess and use / Is like the fleeting vision of a dream. / It fades into the realm of memory; / And fading, will be seen no more."¹¹

Conclusion

Pema Chödrön is an embodiment of The Great Mother. On a psychological level, imagine having a mother who generously gives her advice on how to cope with your most challenging

feelings. On a spiritual level, imagine having one who helps you cope with the raw existential realities of this life! These themes reflect the higher potentials of Pema's nodal axis pathway. She has enriched the world by sharing the fruits of her spiritual work!

At 87 years old, Pema continues to work, spending her time teaching her students how to work with their feelings, navigate emotional reactivity, and approach dying with less fear and more curiosity. She also spends much time in silent retreat, a key Saturn in Pisces method of evolution.

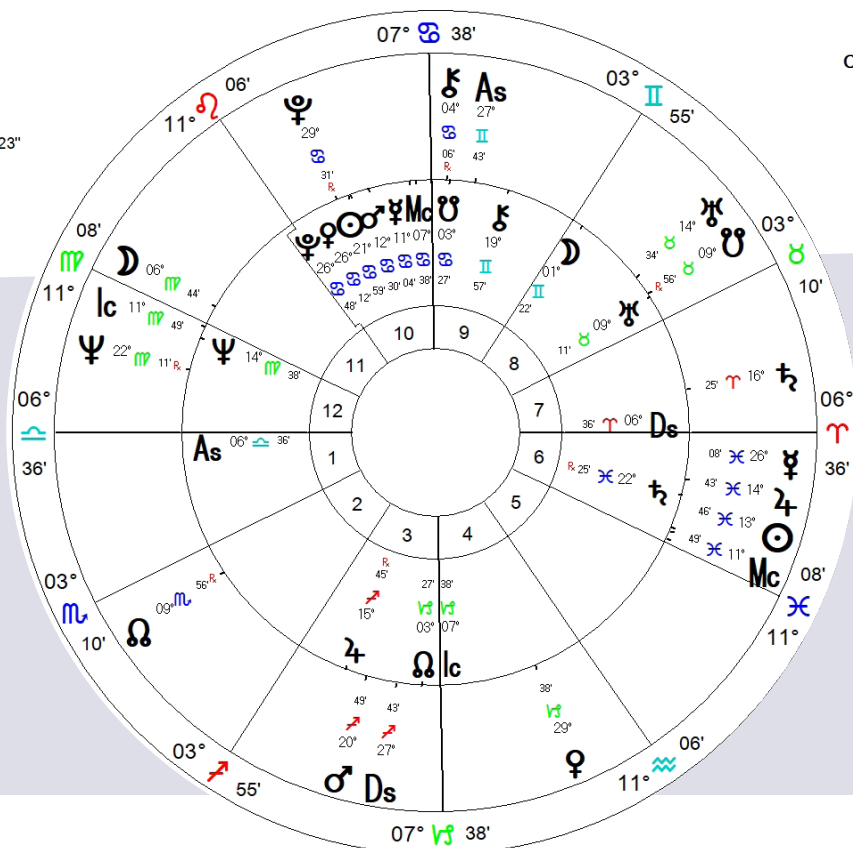
Pema asks us, "How are we going to spend this brief lifetime? Are we going to strengthen our well-perfected ability to struggle against uncertainty, or are we going to train in letting go?"¹² If Saturn in Pisces had a voice, it might ask us the very same thing.

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Inner Wheel
Pema Chodron
Natal Chart
Jul 14 1936, Tue
12:00 pm EDT +4:00
New York, NY
40°N42'51" 074°W00'23"
Geocentric
Tropical
Placidus
True Node



Outer Wheel
Chogyam Trungpa
Natal Chart
Mar 5 1939, Sun
12:00 pm USZ5 -6:00
Lhasa, China
29°N40' 09"E09'
Geocentric
Tropical
Placidus
True Node