

"As one of Pema Chödrön's grateful students, I have been learning the most pressing and necessary lesson of all: how to keep opening wider my own heart."—Alice Walker

WHEN THINGS FALL APART

HEART ADVICE *for*
DIFFICULT TIMES



PEMA CHÖDRÖN

SHAMBHALA
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To Sakyong Mipham,

with devotion, love, and gratitude

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1995 I took a sabbatical. For twelve months I essentially did nothing. It was the most spiritually inspiring time of my life. Pretty much all I did was relax. I read and hiked and slept. I cooked and ate, meditated and wrote. I had no schedule, no agenda, and no “shoulds.” A lot got digested during this completely open, uncharted time. For one thing, I began to read slowly through two cardboard boxes of very raw, unedited transcriptions of talks I had given from 1987 to 1994. Unlike the dathun talks that make up *The Wisdom of No Escape* and the lojong teachings that make up *Start Where You Are*, these talks seemed to have no unifying thread. Now and then I would look at a few transcripts. I found them everything from pedantic to delightful. It was both interesting and embarrassing to be faced with such a profusion of my own words. Gradually, as I read more, I began to see that in some way, no matter what subject I had chosen, what country I was in, or what year it was, I had taught endlessly about the same things: the great need for *maitri* (loving-kindness toward oneself), and developing from that the

awakening of a fearlessly compassionate attitude toward our own pain and that of others. It seemed to me that the view behind every single talk was that we could step into uncharted territory and relax with the groundlessness of our situation. The other underlying theme was dissolving the dualistic tension between us and them, this and that, good and bad, by inviting in what we usually avoid. My teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, described this as “leaning into the sharp points.” It occurred to me that for all those seven years, I’d been simply trying to digest and communicate the helpful and very gutsy instructions that Trungpa Rinpoche gave his students.

As I delved into the boxes, I could see that I still had a long way to go before fully appreciating what I had been taught. I also saw that by putting Rinpoche’s advice into practice as well as I could, and by attempting to share this experience of a student’s path with others, I had found a kind of fundamental happiness and contentment that I’d never known before. It made me laugh to see that, just as I had so often said, making friends with our own demons and

their accompanying insecurity leads to a very simple, understated relaxation and joy.

About halfway through the year, my editor, Emily Hilburn Sell, happened to ask me if I had any more talks that might be usable for a third book. I sent her the cardboard boxes. She read through the transcripts and felt inspired to tell Shambhala Publications, “We have another book.”

Over the next six months, Emily sifted and shifted and deleted and edited, and I had the luxury to work further on each chapter to my heart’s content. When I wasn’t resting or looking at the ocean or walking in the hills, I would get totally absorbed by these talks. Rinpoche once gave me the advice “Relax and write.” At the time it didn’t seem like I’d ever do either of these things, but years later, here I was following his instructions.

The result of this collaboration with Emily and my year of doing nothing is this book.

May it encourage you to settle down with your life and take these teachings on honesty, kindness, and bravery to heart. If your life is chaotic and stressful, there’s plenty of

advice here for you. If you're in transition, suffering from loss, or just fundamentally restless, these teachings are tailor made. The main point is that we all need to be reminded and encouraged to relax with whatever arises and bring whatever we encounter to the path.

In putting these instructions into practice, we join a long lineage of teachers and students who have made the buddha dharma relevant to the ups and downs of their ordinary lives. Just as they made friends with their egos and discovered wisdom mind, so can we.

I thank the Vidyadhara, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, for totally committing his life to the dharma and for being so eager to transmit its essence to the people of the West. May the inspiration I received from him be contagious. May we, like him, lead the life of a bodhisattva, and may we not forget his proclamation that "Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news."

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

Gampo Abbey

Pleasant Bay, Nova Scotia, 1996

Intimacy with Fear

Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth.

EMBARKING on the spiritual journey is like getting into a very small boat and setting out on the ocean to search for unknown lands. With wholehearted practice comes inspiration, but sooner or later we will also encounter fear. For all we know, when we get to the horizon, we are going to drop off the edge of the world. Like all explorers, we are drawn to discover what's waiting out there without knowing yet if we have the courage to face it.

If we become interested in Buddhism and decide to find out what it has to offer, we'll soon discover that there are different slants on how we can proceed. With insight meditation we begin practicing mindfulness, being fully present with all our activities and thoughts. With Zen practice we hear teachings on emptiness and are challenged to connect with the open, unbounded clarity of mind. The vajrayana teachings introduce us to the notion of

working with the energy of all situations, seeing whatever arises as inseparable from the awakened state. Any of these approaches might hook us and fuel our enthusiasm to explore further, but if we want to go beneath the surface and practice without hesitation, it is inevitable that at some point we will experience fear.

Fear is a universal experience. Even the smallest insect feels it. We wade in the tidal pools and put our finger near the soft, open bodies of sea anemones and they close up. Everything spontaneously does that. It's not a terrible thing that we feel fear when faced with the unknown. It is part of being alive, something we all share. We react against the possibility of loneliness, of death, of not having anything to hold on to. Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth.

If we commit ourselves to staying right where we are, then our experience becomes very vivid. Things become very clear when there is nowhere to escape.

During a long retreat, I had what seemed to me the earth-shaking revelation that we cannot be in the present

and run our story lines at the same time! It sounds pretty obvious, I know, but when you discover something like this for yourself, it changes you. Impermanence becomes vivid in the present moment; so do compassion and wonder and courage. And so does fear. In fact, anyone who stands on the edge of the unknown, fully in the present without reference point, experiences groundlessness. That's when our understanding goes deeper, when we find that the present moment is a pretty vulnerable place and that this can be completely unnerving and completely tender at the same time.

When we begin our exploration, we have all kinds of ideals and expectations. We are looking for answers that will satisfy a hunger we've felt for a very long time. But the last thing we want is a further introduction to the boogeyman. Of course, people do try to warn us. I remember when I first received meditation instruction, the woman told me the technique and guidelines on how to practice and then said, "But please don't go away from here thinking that meditation is a vacation from irritation."

Somehow all the warnings in the world don't quite convince us. In fact they draw us closer.

What we're talking about is getting to know fear, becoming familiar with fear, looking it right in the eye—not as a way to solve problems, but as a complete undoing of old ways of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and thinking.

The truth is that when we really begin to do this, we're going to be continually humbled. There's not going to be much room for the arrogance that holding on to ideals can bring. The arrogance that inevitably does arise is going to be continually shot down by our own courage to step forward a little further. The kinds of discoveries that are made through practice have nothing to do with believing in anything. They have much more to do with having the courage to die, the courage to die continually.

Instructions on mindfulness or emptiness or working with energy all point to the same thing: being right on the spot nails us. It nails us right to the point of time and space that we are in. When we stop there and don't act out, don't repress, don't blame it on anyone else, and also don't

blame it on ourselves, then we meet with an open-ended question that has no conceptual answer. We also encounter our heart. As one student so eloquently put it, “Buddha nature, cleverly disguised as fear, kicks our ass into being receptive.”

I once attended a lecture about a man’s spiritual experiences in India in the 1960s. He said he was determined to get rid of his negative emotions. He struggled against anger and lust; he struggled against laziness and pride. But mostly he wanted to get rid of his fear. His meditation teacher kept telling him to stop struggling, but he took that as just another way of explaining how to overcome his obstacles.

Finally the teacher sent him off to meditate in a tiny hut in the foothills. He shut the door and settled down to practice, and when it got dark he lit three small candles. Around midnight he heard a noise in the corner of the room, and in the darkness he saw a very large snake. It looked to him like a king cobra. It was right in front of him, swaying. All night he stayed totally alert, keeping his eyes

on the snake. He was so afraid that he couldn't move.

There was just the snake and himself and fear.

Just before dawn the last candle went out, and he began to cry. He cried not in despair but from tenderness. He felt the longing of all the animals and people in the world; he knew their alienation and their struggle. All his meditation had been nothing but further separation and struggle. He accepted—really accepted wholeheartedly—that he was angry and jealous, that he resisted and struggled, and that he was afraid. He accepted that he was also precious beyond measure—wise and foolish, rich and poor, and totally unfathomable. He felt so much gratitude that in the total darkness he stood up, walked toward the snake, and bowed. Then he fell sound asleep on the floor. When he awoke, the snake was gone. He never knew if it was his imagination or if it had really been there, and it didn't seem to matter. As he put it at the end of the lecture, that much intimacy with fear caused his dramas to collapse, and the world around him finally got through.

No one ever tells us to stop running away from fear. We

are very rarely told to move closer, to just be there, to become familiar with fear. I once asked the Zen master Kobun Chino Roshi how he related with fear, and he said, “I agree. I agree.” But the advice we usually get is to sweeten it up, smooth it over, take a pill, or distract ourselves, but by all means make it go away.

We don’t need that kind of encouragement, because dissociating from fear is what we do naturally. We habitually spin off and freak out when there’s even the merest hint of fear. We feel it coming and we check out. It’s good to know we do that—not as a way to beat ourselves up, but as a way to develop unconditional compassion. The most heartbreaking thing of all is how we cheat ourselves of the present moment.

Sometimes, however, we are cornered; everything falls apart, and we run out of options for escape. At times like that, the most profound spiritual truths seem pretty straightforward and ordinary. There’s nowhere to hide. We see it as well as anyone else— *better* than anyone else.

Sooner or later we understand that although we can’t make

fear look pretty, it will nevertheless introduce us to all the teaching we've ever heard or read.

So the next time you encounter fear, consider yourself lucky. This is where the courage comes in. Usually we think that brave people have no fear. The truth is that they are intimate with fear. When I was first married, my husband said I was one of the bravest people he knew. When I asked him why, he said because I was a complete coward but went ahead and did things anyhow.

The trick is to keep exploring and not bail out, even when we find out that something is not what we thought. That's what we're going to discover again and again and again.

Nothing is what we thought. I can say that with great confidence. Emptiness is not what we thought. Neither is mindfulness or fear. Compassion—not what we thought. Love. Buddha nature. Courage. These are code words for things we don't know in our minds, but any of us could experience them. These are words that point to what life really is when we let things fall apart and let ourselves be nailed to the present moment.

When Things Fall Apart

*When things fall apart and we're on the verge of we
know not what, the test of each of us is to stay on
that brink and not concretize. The spiritual journey
is not about heaven and finally getting to a place
that's really swell.*

GAMPO ABBEY is a vast place where the sea and the sky melt into each other. The horizon extends infinitely, and in this vast space float seagulls and ravens. The setting is like a huge mirror that exaggerates the sense of there being nowhere to hide. Also, since it is a monastery, there are very few means of escape—no lying, no stealing, no alcohol, no sex, no exit.

Gampo Abbey was a place to which I had been longing to go. Trungpa Rinpoche asked me to be the director of the abbey, so finally I found myself there. Being there was an invitation to test my love of a good challenge, because in the first years it was like being boiled alive.

What happened to me when I got to the abbey was that

everything fell apart. All the ways I shield myself, all the ways I delude myself, all the ways I maintain my well-polished self-image—all of it fell apart. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't manipulate the situation. My style was driving everyone else crazy, and I couldn't find anywhere to hide.

I had always thought of myself as a flexible, obliging person who was well liked by almost everyone. I'd been able to carry this illusion throughout most of my life.

During my early years at the abbey, I discovered that I had been living in some kind of misunderstanding. It wasn't that I didn't have good qualities, it was just that I was not the ultimate golden girl. I had so much invested in that image of myself, and it just wasn't holding together anymore. All my unfinished business was exposed vividly and accurately in living Technicolor, not only to myself, but to everyone else as well.

Everything that I had not been able to see about myself before was suddenly dramatized. As if that weren't enough, others were free with their feedback about me and what I

was doing. It was so painful that I wondered if I would ever be happy again. I felt that bombs were being dropped on me almost continuously, with self-deceptions exploding all around. In a place where there was so much practice and study going on, I could not get lost in trying to justify myself and blame others. That kind of exit was not available.

A teacher visited during this time, and I remember her saying to me, “When you have made good friends with yourself, your situation will be more friendly too.”

I had learned this lesson before, and I knew that it was the only way to go. I used to have a sign pinned up on my wall that read: “Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found in us.” Somehow, even before I heard the Buddhist teachings, I knew that this was the spirit of true awakening. It was all about letting go of everything.

Nevertheless, when the bottom falls out and we can’t find anything to grasp, it hurts a lot. It’s like the Naropa