

“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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SEVEN

Hopelessness and Death

If we're willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be exterminated, then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation. This is the first step on the path.

Turning your mind toward the dharma does not bring security or confirmation. Turning your mind toward the dharma does not bring any ground to stand on. In fact, when your mind turns toward the dharma, you fearlessly acknowledge impermanence and change and begin to get the knack of hopelessness.

In Tibetan there's an interesting word: *ye tang che*. The *ye* part means "totally, completely," and the rest of it means "exhausted." Altogether, *ye tang che* means totally tired out. We might say "totally fed up." It describes an experience of complete hopelessness, of completely giving up hope. This is an important point. This is the beginning of the beginning. Without giving up hope—that there's somewhere better to be, that there's someone better to be—we will never relax with where we are or who we are.

We could say that the word *mindfulness* is pointing to being one with our experience, not dissociating, being right there when our hand touches the doorknob or the telephone rings or feelings of all kinds arise. The word *mindfulness* describes being right where we are. *Ye tang che*, however, is not so easily digested. It expresses the renunciation that's essential for the spiritual path.

To think that we can finally get it all together is unrealistic. To seek for some lasting security is futile. To undo our very ancient and very stuck habitual patterns of mind requires that we begin to turn around some of our most basic assumptions. Believing in a solid, separate self, continuing to seek pleasure and avoid pain, thinking that someone “out there” is to blame for our pain—one has to get totally fed up with these ways of thinking. One has to give up hope that this way of thinking will bring us satisfaction. Suffering begins to dissolve when we can question the belief or the hope that there’s anywhere to hide.

Hopelessness means that we no longer have the spirit for holding our trip together. We may still *want* to hold our trip together. We long to have some reliable, comfortable ground under our feet, but we’ve tried a thousand ways to hide and a thousand ways to tie up all the loose ends, and the ground just keeps moving under us. Trying to get lasting security teaches us a lot, because if we never try to do it, we never notice that it can’t be done. Turning our minds toward the dharma speeds up the process of discovery. At every turn we realize once again that it’s completely hopeless—we can’t get any ground under our feet.

The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in God. It is an issue that applies to everyone, including both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there’s some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us. It means thinking there’s always going to be a babysitter available when we need one. We all are inclined to abdicate our responsibilities and delegate our authority to something outside ourselves. Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves. We sometimes think that dharma is something out-

"The Tibetan Buddhist equivalent of Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. . . Chödrön demonstrates how effective the Buddhist point of view can be in bringing order into disordered lives." —*Publishers Weekly*

"This is a book that could serve you for a lifetime." —*Natural Health Magazine*

There is a fundamental opportunity for happiness right within our reach, yet we usually miss it—ironically, while we are caught up in attempts to escape pain and suffering. Drawn from traditional Buddhist wisdom, Pema Chödrön's radical and compassionate advice for what to do when things fall apart in our lives goes against the grain of our usual habits and expectations. There is only one approach to suffering that is of lasting benefit, Pema teaches, and that approach involves moving *toward* painful situations with friendliness and curiosity, relaxing into the essential groundlessness of our entire situation. It is there, in the midst of chaos, that we can discover the truth and love that are indestructible.

Included in the book are:

- ways to use painful emotions to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and courage
- ways to communicate that lead to openness and true intimacy with others
- practices for reversing our negative habitual patterns
- methods for working with chaotic situations
- ways to cultivate compassionate, energetic social action



PEMA CHÖDRÖN is an American Buddhist nun and one of the foremost students of Chögyam Trungpa, the renowned meditation master. She is the author of *The Wisdom of No Escape* and *Start Where You Are*, as well as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners.

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