

2014

## Reflection on Pema Chödrön's When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, C. (2014). Reflection on Pema Chödrön's When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times, *Best Integrated Writing*, 1.

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**Best Integrated Writing: Journal of Excellence in  
Integrated Writing Courses at Wright State**

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Fall 2014 (Volume 1)

Article #4

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**Reflection on Pema Chödrön's**  
*When Things Fall Apart:*  
*Heart Advice for Difficult Times*

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CST 2320-W01: Nonwestern Religions

Fall 2013, Lake Campus

Dr. Sharon A. Showman

Pema Chödrön knows me and is trying to help me. I, on one hand, am grateful. But my basic gut-level response is to be scared, worried and extremely cautious. I know her help is going to hurt. It will hurt a lot. I just hope the pain cauterizes old paths and patterns so they can no longer trap my mind and innermost self in despondency. Notice that I just wrote *I hope*. Evidently I am in for a very hard lesson. Chödrön is all about embracing hopelessness as a means of attaining true self-knowledge and enlightenment.

I chose to read and report on the book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. I based my decision on the title and the fact that Chödrön is an American Buddhist nun and a student under renowned meditation master Chögyam Trungpa. Chödrön is also a resident teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners. I chose a book written by a Buddhist for several reasons. Buddhism says it is possible to find enlightenment in one lifetime. Also, each individual must follow their own path to enlightenment. Buddhism not only seems to espouse compassion for others but also self-sufficiency, which is terribly important in Western thinking.

I, just like every other person on the planet, have had or currently have difficulties and a full measure of *dukkha*. (*Dukkha* translates loosely as “suffering.”) Like everyone else, I just want the problems and the pain to stop. Just like so many people who get caught up in their difficulties, I cannot seem to find my way out of the circle of pain. Chödrön states, “I remember the day I understood without question that we create our situation by how we use our mind, by how we keep patterning our responses to life, in the same old, very dusty, predictable way” (138). Over and over through this book, Chödrön exhorts me to change my way of thinking – my way of looking at life’s trials and tribulations. So to stay in my painful world, I need to do what I have always done to get the same ineffective, agonizing results. By changing my thought patterns, Chödrön says I can change the result. Luckily for me, she uses her book to illustrate how this can be accomplished.

Chödrön takes what I and many other people consider negative emotions and feelings and twists them into new patterns. She then tries to teach us to embrace them. This is one way to stay in the moment and learn compassion, courage, kindness, and mindfulness. At the end of chapter one, Chödrön lets me know she will twist my understanding of how to attain happiness around. She says, “Emptiness... mindfulness and fear... Compassion... Love. Buddha nature. Courage... 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” (5).

At times while reading the book, I felt as though Chödrön was telling me a lot of “stuff” but not giving me concrete steps which could actually help me. I found myself at the end of a chapter thinking, *Well, so what? I understand some of what she is saying, but how do I get from point A to point B?* I am embarrassed to admit I was near the end of the book before I even started comprehending her advice. First, this is not wrapped up in a tidy package. It would be easier if she gave me steps, like try Step 1 for 30 days, go to Step 2 and do that for 60 days, etc. This seems to be a lifelong process with any progress coming in short fits and starts. Evidently I was not going to get a money-back guarantee that by following her plan, I could attain enlightenment in five easy steps just by buying her book. Shoot!

Finally, I started to understand some of her basic lessons. I noticed that Chödrön repeatedly urges me to strip away the masks I use to hide myself: fear, ego, self-doubt, self-hate, aggression, etc. All are dissected and, through meditation, turned into the ability to actually feel the pain and fear so I can release it instead of hiding it and keeping it under lock and key. For example, I believe hope is a positive, good feeling. Throughout life I have been told to “have hope, don’t give up hope, you need to stay hopeful.” Chödrön equates hopelessness truly felt and appropriately acknowledged as positive progress to enlightenment. She states, “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” (38).

This chapter was eye-opening to me. Many individuals close to me suffer from depression, and I have seen it get quite severe. When the afflicted person is an optimist, being diagnosed with depression is particularly ironic. People are constantly told to not give up hope, to hope things will get better, and then feel ashamed that they cannot “pull themselves up by their boot straps.” Chödrön says to feel the hopelessness, to “acknowledge that right now we feel like a piece of shit and not be squeamish about taking a good look. That’s the compassionate thing to do” (41). Although Chödrön mentions compassion throughout the book, the line above and a line in a later chapter of the book drive home the concept of self-kindness and gave me permission to show compassion to myself as easily as I show compassion to others: “Maybe the most important teaching is to lighten up and relax...We’re letting it blur the sharp corners of self criticism and complaint” (140).

Many of Chödrön’s teachings advocate compassion for self and others. Some references are overt, such as the quotes used in the paragraph above. Often she is more covert in her encouragement of greater compassion for self and others. To me, compassionate, kind behavior is equated with being “Christ-like.” I have a sign in my office which states *Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some battle*. I have aspired to be compassionate to others with varying degrees of success over the years. Now I must strive to show compassion to myself as well as others.

One practice Chödrön uses and teaches us in the book is *Tonglen*. Through *Tonglen* we breathe in another’s pain or hurt and then breathe out healing or happiness and send it towards that person. Chödrön illustrates the four stages of using it as a formal meditation practice. Eventually we should be able to feel our own pain and connect with others known or unknown to us who are feeling a similar pain. For example, if we are lonely, we can breathe in the combined pain of all who are lonely and then breathe out healing relief to all of us. Again Chödrön takes generally regarded negative emotions and turns them inside out by using Buddhist practices. She says about *Tonglen*, “The practice dissolves the layers of self-protection we tried so hard to create” (94). I liked that I could use

Tonglen very informally and in any place. I believe it can allow me to connect with people in a very fundamental way while helping myself and others.

There is a stream of gentleness that runs throughout the book. Chödrön mentions that we need to give ourselves a break if we are unable to meditate occasionally or if we cannot shut down extraneous thoughts when we do meditate. Chapter four is about relaxing, and Chödrön guides the reader through a step-by-step process to begin meditation. My left brain was instantly gratified because I do follow directions well. Years ago I meditated fairly regularly, but I have been away from practicing it for a long time, so I forgot most of what I did know about meditation. I vaguely remember how darn difficult it was to keep random thoughts from bursting in. I felt like Chödrön understood my faulty attempts and was happy to deal with them gently:

So right from the beginning it's helpful to always remind yourself that meditation is about opening and relaxing with whatever arises, without picking and choosing...Allen Ginsberg uses the expression "surprise mind." You sit down and—wham!—a rather nasty surprise arises. Okay, so be it. This part is not to be rejected but compassionately acknowledged as "thinking" and let go. (23)

There are many little gems of wisdom scattered all through *When Things Fall Apart*. To be quite honest, I think I barely scratched the surface of its content. There is a side quote in *The Essential Crazy Wisdom*; D. T. Suzuki says, "We have two eyes to see two sides of things, but there must be a third eye which will see everything at the same time and yet not see anything. That is to understand Zen" (Nisker72). This sums up much of the wisdom in Chödrön's book. To see good and bad, right and wrong, or hope and fear at the same time will lead to mindfulness and enlightenments. Over the last several weeks in class, I believe many of us noticed the interconnectedness of our studies. We have come across a belief or practice in one text that is referred to in another book, a video, or

folded into a new belief system. As a result, I was not too surprised to see Chödrön write of our essential wisdom “we begin to trust our basic wisdom mind. We find that we have an essential wisdom, an essential good heart, that is stronger and more fundamental than our unkindness and aggression. As we practice, we find that wisdom” (132).

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### **Works Cited**

- Chödrön, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Boston: Shambhala, 2000. Print
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