

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times

Notes from the book by Pema Chodron, Shambhala, Boston, 1997

"One can be lonely and not be tossed away by it." (Zen master Katagiri Roshi)

We feel we deserve resolution. We think things need to work out one way or the other. If I can't go left or right, I will die. Yet scrambling for resolution and its security has never brought anything but momentary joy. It's like changing the position of our legs in meditation. And likewise in other situations, we keep moving around seeking pleasure, seeking comfort, but the satisfaction that we get is very short-lived. To become unstuck from this position requires bravery, because it is to change our way of perceiving reality.

When we feel lonely, hopeless, anxious, there is no need to move to the right or left, or to look for a babysitter. We can sit and feel what we feel. And just as we do in meditation---not judge whatever arises in our mind but to see it as just "thinking". It is to have an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity and uncertainty, because there is no problem that someone needs to fix someplace.

Usually we regard loneliness as an enemy. Heartache is not something we choose to invite in. It's restless and pregnant and hot with the desire to escape and find something or someone to keep us company. When we can rest in the middle, we begin to have a nonthreatening relationship with loneliness, a relaxing and cooling loneliness that completely turns our usual fearful patterns upside down.

There are six ways to describe this cool loneliness: less desire, contentment, avoiding unnecessary activity, complete discipline, not wandering in the world of desire, and not seeking security from one's discursive thoughts.

Less desire is the willingness to be lonely without resolution when everything in us yearns for something to cheer us up and change our mood.

Practicing less desire causes a shift so we are not so solidly seduced by our Very Important Story Line that has us spinning off and going crazy in doing or getting something.

Contentment is not avoiding the feeling and fear that we have a lot to lose as things change, because change and impermanence is constant. It is to be lonely with no alternatives, content to be right here with the mood and texture of what's happening, with the changes.

Avoiding unnecessary activity means not looking for a way out, to find something to save us when we're lonely in a "hot" way. It is not trying to come up with ways to keep ourselves busy so we don't have to feel any pain. This business could take the form of obsessively daydreaming of true romance, or going off by ourselves into the wilderness. It is not seeking companionship to distance ourselves from the demon loneliness. The better way is to have compassion and respect for ourselves and to stop trying to escape from being alone with ourselves, and to relax with loneliness.

Complete discipline means being willing to come back gently to the present moment; to sit still and just be here, alone. It is to sit still long enough to realize how things really are---that we are fundamentally alone, and there is nothing anywhere to hold on to, and that this is not a problem. The problem is our habitual assumptions---all our ideas about how things are, which keep us from seeing things in a fresh, open way. The truth is that we don't know anything and there is no certainty, that things are unresolved. We are cheating ourselves when we run away from the ambiguity of loneliness.

Wandering in the world of desire involves looking for alternatives, seeking something to comfort us---food, drink, and people. This desire has an addiction quality that has us wanting to grab for something to make things okay. Not wandering in the world of desire is relating directly with how things are. Loneliness is not a problem. Loneliness is nothing to be solved. The same is true for any other experience we have.

Not seeking security from one's discursive thoughts means not seeking the companionship of our own constant conversation with ourselves about how it is and how it isn't, whether it is, or whether it isn't, whether it should or whether it shouldn't, whether it can or whether it can't. It is not to expect security from our own internal chatter. It is to be aware that this chatter is just "thinking." It has no objective reality. It is transparent and ungraspable. We just need to touch this chatter and let it go, and not make much ado about nothing.

Cool loneliness allows us to look honestly and aggressively at our own minds. To gradually drop our ideals of who we think we ought to be, or who we think we want to be, or who we think other people think we want to be or ought to be. It is to look directly with compassion and humor at who we are. Cool loneliness doesn't provide any resolution or give us ground under our feet. It challenges us to step into a world with no reference point without polarizing or solidifying.

When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart? The next time you get a chance, experiment with this.