

# When Things Fall Apart Summary

By Pema Chödrön

'I'm fine, fine,' says Charlie Croker, a Cockney gangster in the British caper film, *The Italian Job*. To which Mr. Bridger, the crime syndicate boss, replies, 'You know what "fine" stands for, don't you? Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic, and Emotional.'

*When Things Fall Apart* is a spiritual guide that offers simple, practical advice on how to live with less fear, less anxiety, and an open heart. For those who are "fine," in other words, "falling apart," Buddhist nun and author Pema Chödrön, has some heart advice for hard times.

Pema Chödrön is one of the foremost students of Chögyam Trungpa, the renowned meditation master. In this book, Chödrön speaks to the hurt, wounded, or broken parts of us. In so doing, she helps us to develop resilience in the face of adversity, and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the present moment. She draws on her own confrontation with a personal crisis, as well as a broad range of Buddhist concepts and strategies. These strategies range from meditation to self-compassion, so that we can embrace the parts of ourselves that don't feel so fine, with openness, curiosity, and compassion.

Briefly, we'll explore our author's personal spiritual journey, and why she believes we should bravely embrace the unknown, befriend our fears, and loosen our grip on hope. Then we'll learn about the power behind compassion-based meditation, and how Chödrön's insights can help us deal with the challenges life throws at us.

# Stay With the Shakiness

*'To stay with that shakiness – to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness – that's the path of true awakening. Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic – this is the spiritual path.'*

Chödrön's moment of spiritual awakening wasn't typical – it was a genuine spiritual experience that happened before she became aware of Buddhist teachings. It was triggered when her husband told her he was having an affair. Standing outside her house, drinking a cup of tea, she heard the car drive up and the door bang shut. Her husband walked around the corner, and without warning, he told her that he was having an affair and he wanted a divorce. She paused, took a deep breath, and at that moment felt a sense of "limitless stillness." She then regrouped and picked up a stone and threw it at him.

When anyone asks how she got involved in Buddhism, she always explains that it was because she was so angry with her husband. The truth she now believes is that he saved her life. When her marriage fell apart, she 'tried hard – very, very hard – to go back to some kind of comfort, some kind of "security," some kind of familiar resting place.'

Chödrön turned towards Buddhism for solace, but even then, things still fell apart. She was asked to be the director of a Buddhist monastery. 'It was here,' she says, 'where the well-polished self-image that she'd tried hard to maintain, fell apart.' No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't manipulate the situation – her style of leadership was getting on people's nerves, and she couldn't find anywhere to hide. She had always thought of herself as a 'flexible, obliging person who was well-liked by almost everyone.' This had been her self-image for most of her life.

The feedback that she received from others about herself, and her leadership style, was so painful to hear that she wondered if she would ever be happy again. For her, it felt as if 'bombs were being dropped on her almost continuously, with self-deceptions exploding all around.'

The book opens with these two personal stories, to illustrate that it's not if, but *when* things fall apart. We all encounter endings, change, and chaos at some point in our lives, and as W.B. Yeats and Chinua Achebe both attest, things will fall apart. The problem is, when they do, we tend to think that the point is to pass "the test" or to overcome the challenge, 'But the truth,' says Chödrön, 'is that things don't really get "solved." They come together, and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It is just how it is.'

To remain open and composed when things fall apart, amidst the chaos, is how we heal. Healing comes from allowing room for all emotions: room for grief, for relief, for misery, and for joy.

## **The Buddha Teaches Two Things, Suffering and the End of Suffering**

Suffering is an inevitable part of life. It's usually associated with tragedy, but when Chödrön uses the word, she also talks about disruptive times that give us anxiety or despair. This can manifest when we lose a job, encounter a stressful conflict, or when we believe that life isn't going our way. Suffering can simply be a general feeling of discontent. However we define it, one thing remains true: suffering is universal.

So how do we begin the practice of ending our suffering? We breathe it

in, and we get close to it. According to Chödrön, our job is to recognize our suffering, feel it, and give it space. When things fall apart, our task is to gently hold the pain and lean into the discomfort, rather than to avoid these feelings at all costs. These moments of pain and shame don't kill us; it's the opposite. Instead, such moments awaken us and open our hearts to healing and spiritual awakening. The path to spiritual awakening is to be fully alive and awake to every moment of life, including a lack of cheer and dark times when clouds cover the sun. If we can be willing to relate directly to what's happening, with precision and gentleness is when we feel a sense of ease and boundless joy.

When things fall apart, the path that Chödrön invites us on is to embrace the unknown, befriend our fears, let go of hope, and practice compassion.

## **Let There Be Room for Not Knowing**

*'Letting there be room for not knowing is the most important thing of all.'*

Let's look at this story about a family during tough times. 'They were very poor. The parents had one son, who was extremely precious to them, and the family hoped that he would bring them some financial support and prestige. Then he was thrown from a horse and crippled. It seemed like the end of their lives. Two weeks after that, the army came into the village and took away all the healthy strong men to fight in the war, and this young man was allowed to stay behind.' The moral of the story is that a significant disappointment might not be the end of the story. It may just be the start of a great adventure. 'Life is like that,' says Chödrön, 'We don't know anything. We call something bad; we call it good. But we really just don't know.'

The trouble is, in the midst of chaos, it's easy for fear to take over, which hijacks us into worst-case-scenario thinking, then spiraling into full-blown panic mode. When we react in this manner, we only compound our suffering. So rather than go to war with our fears, can we embrace and befriend them?

## **Become Intimate With Fear**

*'We can't be fearless if we haven't felt fear.'*

Fear is a universal experience. The problem is how we relate to it. We run, or we numb. We find ways to distract ourselves; perhaps we play video games or have one too many glasses of wine; we do just about anything to make it go away. But when we learn to embrace our fears, we open the door to a deeper level of self-understanding and compassion towards ourselves and others.

What does this intimacy with fear look like?

Fear isn't an emotion to be feared and avoided at all costs, but to be embraced. What we resist persists. But if we can be with our fear and befriend it, rather than keep trying to run from it, we can tap into a deeper level of self-awareness. We should live with our fear vividly so that we can be genuinely open to all our emotions, including wonder, awe, and joy.

Being brave isn't a matter of being fearless; it's about learning how to be intimate with our fears. Instructions on mindfulness all point to the same thing – being present to whatever arises. When we don't run, act out, blame, or repress, and when we stop in the midst of fear and make space

for it – this is when we also meet our heart.

However, just as we need to lessen our aversion towards fear, so too do we need to loosen our grip on always hoping for things to be different or better.

## Abandon Hope

*'For as long as we cling to hope, we prevent ourselves from being truly joyful.'*

Do you ever fall into the 'If-then' thinking trap? If I achieve or do x, then I'll be happy. Or if I go to this new place, then I won't feel so stuck. So often, we live in hope for something better. We think, 'When I get to L.A., I won't feel this way anymore.' But with the hope of something better, fueled by the intention of wanting to get rid of our painful feeling, we naively cultivate a subtle aggression against ourselves.'

As with fear, hope stems from a feeling that we lack something. Buddhist teachings have a unique take on the relationship between fear and hope. For as long as there's one, there's always the other. Chödrön says, 'In the world of hope and fear, we always have to change the channel, change the temperature, change the music, because something is getting uneasy, something is getting restless, something is beginning to hurt, and we keep looking for alternatives.'

We might think hope helps us overcome adversity, but in reality, hope can make us fearful and anxious about the future, or lead to disappointment. On the other hand, giving up hope is an encouragement to stick with ourselves, make friends with ourselves, and not run away from ourselves. So, what if we replace the elusive "then" with "now," and

embrace whatever is happening now, in a way that's kinder and wiser? Perhaps then we may embrace life as it is, rather than what we fear, or hope it to be. Maybe then we'll get the chance to feel a more joyful connection to ourselves and life – one that's more honest, direct, more authentic. But to do this, we need to open our hearts.

## **Practice Loving-Kindness**

Meditative practices can help us find a new way of relating to our own suffering and that of others, which can help us through difficult times. Chödrön introduces an essential meditative practice: Maitri.

Maitri is the basis of compassion. It's a Sanskrit word that's translated as unconditional friendship with oneself. Chödrön believes that 'The most difficult times for many of us are the ones we give ourselves.' Before we can extend compassion towards others, we need to show compassion towards ourselves. It's a contemplative practice that encourages us to come home to ourselves and to befriend ourselves at the deepest level. Unlike other meditation practices that invite us to let go of the "thinking mind," the technique of Maitri uses the thinking mind to help us develop compassion towards ourselves. We can gently offer ourselves loving kindness by repeating a phrase like, 'May I be happy, healthy, safe, and live with ease.' Repeating this phrase can be a powerful practice for breaking negative patterns, especially habitual negative or self-deprecating thoughts.

Spending time meditating and extending compassion towards ourselves might feel a little strange at first, even egocentric, but it's the starting place for developing compassion towards others. Only when we learn to befriend ourselves, can we deepen our capacity for compassion for others.

## **Breathe In Pain, Breathe Out Joy**

Developing a deep friendship with ourselves translates into being more compassionate towards others. This allows us to recognize others' suffering, and we can learn to "breathe in and out" for everyone. Furthermore, to extend our compassion towards others, Chödrön offers two practices, the "Just like me" practice, and the practice of Tonglen.

The "Just like me" practice is beneficial when we're feeling irritable. For example, perhaps we're stuck in a traffic jam. Instead of fuming, which gets us nowhere, we can look at people sitting in their cars around us and repeat, "Just like me." Just like me these people also have somewhere to go and are being delayed. Just like me, they're human beings, and just like me, it would really be helpful if we could find another way to relate to our frustration. This way of relating to others helps us get in touch with our shared humanity.

Another powerful Buddhist practice that involves compassion towards others is Tonglen, which is Tibetan for giving and taking, or sending and receiving. This powerful practice awakens our compassion through our breathing. It applies to any situation that's painful and difficult for us to witness. Perhaps there's someone dear to us who is suffering. We can stop for a moment, breathe in any suffering that we see or feel, and breathe out a sense of relief. We can even breathe out a sense of joy that



we'd like that person to feel. It's a direct and straightforward process. Unlike the formal practice, it does not involve any visualizations or steps. It's a simple and natural exchange where we observe suffering, we take it in with the in-breath, and we send out relief with the out-breath.

## **In Conclusion**

Chödrön brings ancient wisdom to help us navigate our modern daily life, which is full of triumphs and tragedies. She shows how a Buddhist perspective can invite a sense of order to a disordered life. Her insights in this book are both wise and practical. But perhaps what makes Chödrön's message resonate with a variety of people is its universality. Each of us has experienced suffering. 'How we interact with that feeling,' Chödrön says, 'can create the possibility of a more joyful life.'

W.B. Yeats spoke about the center being unable to hold, allowing things to fall apart. Chödrön provides a way to center ourselves when things fall apart and helps us to realize that fear should never be something we're afraid of.