

Meditation on Self-Compassion

(adapted from Pema Chodron & Maria Popova)

To be human is to live in a constant state of 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.

Bravery is not the absence of fear but intimacy with fear. We can run away or commit ourselves to staying right where we are. Things become very clear when there is nowhere to escape. This clarity is a matter of becoming intimate with fear. Rather than treating it as a problem to be solved, we can use it as a tool with which to dismantle all of our familiar habits of being, "a complete undoing of old ways of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and thinking."

When things fall apart it is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth 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's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.

The fundamental choice we have is how we will face our difficulties and uncertainty -- whether with running away or with openness to possibility. Things are always in transition, To stay with that difficulty — to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of being trapped or wanting revenge — that is 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 healing path.

Getting the knack of catching ourselves -- of gently and compassionately catching ourselves -- is the path of bravery. If we catch ourselves one zillion times -- whether we like it or not -- we train our minds. We can train our minds into resentment, bitterness or righteous indignation or we can train our minds into a sense of relief, a sense of freedom, even a sense of inspiration.

When inspiration has become hidden, when we feel ready to give up, this is the time when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself... In the midst of loneliness, in the midst of fear, in the middle of feeling misunderstood and rejected is the heartbeat of all things.

The present moment — however uncertain, however difficult — is the sole reality of life. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and it's always with us. We can be with what's happening and not shut down or dissociate. Awake-ness is found in both our pleasure and our pain, our confusion and our wisdom, available in each moment of our weird, unfathomable, ordinary everyday lives.

Remaining present and intimate with the moment requires mastering loving-kindness toward oneself, that most difficult art of self-compassion. What makes *self-compassion* such a different approach is that we are not trying to solve a problem. We are not striving to make pain go away or to become a better person. In fact, we are giving up control altogether and letting our core beliefs and expectations fall apart. This starts with realizing that whatever occurs is neither the beginning nor the end. It is just the same kind of normal human experience that's been happening to everyday people from the beginning of time. Thoughts, emotions, moods, and memories come and they go, and basic now-ness is always here.

This is the beginning of the beginning. Without giving up the expectation — 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. Suffering begins to dissolve when we can question the belief that there's anywhere better to hide. Begin with what is. Let the absence of expectations be your security.

Only through such active self-compassion to our own darkness can we begin to offer authentic light to anybody else, to become a force of radiance in the world.