

Joe Rettenmaier, Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation, May 17, 2020

Reading

When things fall apart and we're on the verge of we know not what, the test for each of us is to stay on that brink and not concretize. The spiritual journey is not about heaven and finally getting to a place that's really swell. In fact, that way of looking at things is what keeps us miserable. Thinking that we can find some lasting pleasure and avoid pain is... a hopeless cycle that goes round and round endlessly and causes us to suffer greatly. The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe that things last—that they *don't* disintegrate, that they *can* be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security.

~ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*, 1997

Power Retreat

by Joe Rettenmaier, M.Div.

Pema's words lend a broader perspective to what we're experiencing in this moment as a new novel coronavirus infects our human species, and the entirety of humankind is shutting down, staying at home, in retreat from its deadly threat.

The danger this novel coronavirus burdens us with is causing our hearts to break from the loss of life, the loss of income and livelihoods, the damage to families and loved ones and communities. And as if that's not enough to endure worldwide and all at the same time and all with the same devastating outcomes, as we look after our beloveds and dare to venture out to do essential errands each day, we're doing so with strange new social manners in place: speaking through masks and sanitizing all touches as shields of glass and distance physically separate us from one another.

Friends, this is a new threshold of uncertainty for the entire planet. You are not alone in your retreat. On this eve of states and nations around the world cautiously beginning to open

themselves up, the very ethics of our communities, our home economies, our healthcare systems are being pushed to a new breaking point. Every single day we are having to rapidly accept new behaviors as science reveals the clearer truth that this virus is not leaving us anytime soon.

In truth, like countless other pandemics in our planet's history, this virus is causing mutations in the very ethics of our social activities. It has already shut down humankind's most powerful industries and nearly every type of socializing worldwide. All at once. Unprecedented. All 7.7 billion of us humans have had to rapidly retreat, and our industrial, energy, and financial powers have had to do the same.

Unexpectedly, though, ecosystems and climates have been able to breathe a sigh of relief and briefly heal from our relentless human harm -- a stunning turn of events we have never had the blessing to stop and witness and realize before. As this COVID Spring has bloomed rapidly among us, we have managed to find cleaner, healthier ways to work and socialize through virtual means, adding love, concern, and the greater good of public health into our homebound retreats.

As we power retreat together as one species among many, I find Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart* to be especially relevant amid our uncertainty. She sheds light on just how much power and faith we can weather during chaotic times.

In the reading I just shared with you, she mentions the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths which is that for all living beings suffering is a part of living, and as long as we continue to falsely believe that things can last, that they *don't* disintegrate, that they *can* be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security, we will continue to know suffering.

To briefly explain this more, the Buddha's Four Noble Truths are: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that frees us from suffering. Now, quite often people tend to get stuck on that first noble truth, the truth of suffering. Or as it's usually interpreted into English, that "life is suffering." But this notion isn't as dire as it sounds. It's actually quite the opposite. We often miss the full meaning of this wisdom because the Pali/Sanskrit term the Buddha actually used is "dukkha." Dukkha is

usually translated by English speaking scholars into the word “suffering,” but a more accurate translation is “incapable of satisfying,” or “not being able to bear or withstand anything.” Think of dukkha as being closer to the English term “stressful,” both the positive and negative connotations it conjures.

The Buddha’s notion of dukkha also implies transience, impermanence. Dukkha can be experiencing something precious or joyful, or something miserable or sad. And we can rest assured it will eventually change or end.

So, with his first Noble Truth the Buddha was not saying that everything about living is relentlessly horrid. Instead, as he devoted the last 40 to 45 years of his life to formally teaching his Four Noble Truths to tens of thousands of his followers, he emphasized the happiness and wholesomeness they lead to -- like healthy family life, resilient community, wholesome healthiness that comes from serving a greater good. This is the result of the dukkha that is inherent in our good fortune and joy, as well as our bad fortune and misery.

Another notion Pema Chodron elaborates on in her teachings is samsara. Samsara is that continual desire we all have to pursue lasting pleasures or to avoid experiencing pain. But samsara is a hopeless cycle that goes round and round. As Chodron said, “suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe that things last, that they don’t disintegrate, that they can be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security.”

With so much change happening during this pandemic, it seems our desire for samsara has been short-circuited friends. Yet all 7.7 billion of us human beings are really hungering for security at this very moment, aren’t we....

Dukkha and Samsara are lessons that will span every stage of our lifetimes. There is no living without them being present in our mind and heart. Chodron writes “the only time we ever know what's really going on is when the rug's been pulled out and we can't find anywhere to land. We use these situations either to wake ourselves up, or to put ourselves to sleep. Right now—in the very instant of groundlessness—is the seed of taking care of those who need our care, and of discovering our goodness.”

Friends, this global retreat of fear and uncertainty is definitely putting our personal patience for living with uncertainty to the test, yes? The spiritual path in front of us now is for each of us to recognize the spiritual lessons this global uncertainty has to teach us. Life is a very good teacher and a good friend. Life is always transitioning, always leading us from one threshold to the next, if only we would realize it and rest with it. An uncertain, liminal state of affairs is a powerful situation where we can stretch our heart and mind beyond current limits. Chodron writes:

“To stay with that shakiness—to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness – 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 spiritual path. Getting the knack of catching ourselves, of gently and compassionately catching ourselves is the path of the warrior. We catch ourselves one zillion times as once again, whether we like it or not, we harden into resentment, bitterness, righteous indignation.

All over the world, everybody always strikes out at the enemy, and the pain escalates forever. Every day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves 'Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?' Every day, at the moment when things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, 'Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?'

Friends, that is and always will be the path to accepting the uncertainty, the dukkha, that this novel coronavirus is causing all 7.7 billion of us to experience at the exact same time, together.

You are not alone in your retreat, friends. In truth, you have never been more connected.

May it be so.