

Comfortable with Uncertainty  
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A big burly samurai comes to a Zen master and says, “Tell me the nature of heaven and hell.” The Zen master looks him in the face and says, “Why should I tell a scruffy, disgusting, miserable slob like you? A worm like you, do you think I should tell you anything?”

Consumed by rage, the samurai draws his sword and raises it to cut off the master’s head. The Zen master says, “That’s hell.” Instantly, the samurai understands that he has just created his own hell—black and hot, filled with hatred, self-protection, anger, and resentment.

He sees that he was so deep in hell that he was ready to kill someone. Tears fill his eyes as he puts his palms together to bow in gratitude for this insight. The Zen master says, “That’s heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

Pema Chodron goes on to write about how spiritual awakening is often talked about as a journey to the top of a mountain where we leave who we are at the bottom as we make our way to the top. At the peak, there is no more pain or suffering. Pema writes that “the only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all others behind. Their suffering continues unrelieved by our personal escape. On the journey of the warrior-bodhisattva, the path goes down, not up, as if the mountain pointed toward the earth instead of the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward turbulence and doubt however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is our heart—our wounded, softened heart. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die. This love is bodhichitta. It is gentle and warm; it is clear and sharp; it is open and spacious. The awakened heart of bodhichitta is the basic goodness of all beings.”<sup>2</sup>

Pema goes on to write about how we spend our lives seeking escape from the reality of our tenderness, of our vulnerability, of the uncertainty and lack of solidity that defines our existence. She does not tell us to have faith, that it will be alright. It is hard. We will suffer. We will all die as will the people we love and this is no one’s fault or any god’s divine plan. It is the nature of reality.

Our work is not to pretend that this is not true but to lean into its truth understanding that we have what we need within us to face it with courage and wisdom, and that we are not alone. That we all, everyone of us, take this journey together.

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<sup>1</sup> Pema Chodron, Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion (Boston, Shambala Publications, 2002), Kindle Edition, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Chodron, Kindle Edition, 2.

The central question Pema Chodron presents us with is not how to avoid uncertainty and fear but how we relate to discomfort. How do we practice with difficulty, with our emotions, with the unpredictable encounters of an ordinary day?<sup>3</sup>

In his book, Nonsense, the Power of Non-Knowing, Jamie Holmes<sup>4</sup> writes about uncertainty and what happens to us when we are confronted with it.

Holmes writes about the work of psychologist Jerome Kagan who posits that the “uncertainty resolution” was one of the foremost determinants of our behavior. When we can’t immediately gratify our desire to know, we become very motivated to reach a clear explanation. That motivation, in Kagan’s view, lies at the heart of most other motives: achievement, affiliation, power, etc. We all want to eliminate the distress of the unknown. We want, in other words, to achieve what is known as “cognitive closure.” This term was first coined by the social psychologist Arie Kruglanski, who defined it as “individuals’ desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity,” a drive for certainty in the face of a less than certain world.<sup>5</sup>

“When faced with heightened ambiguity and a lack of clear-cut answers, we need to know—and as quickly as possible...Heightened need for cognitive closure can bias our choices, change our preferences, and influence our mood. In our rush for definition, we tend to produce fewer hypotheses and search less thoroughly for information.”<sup>6</sup> In this state, we are apt to produce stereotypes, harsh judgments and make decisions not founded on facts. In other words, we lash out, blame and look for easy answers when we are uncomfortable.

According to Holmes, we should be educating students to be flexible, self-critical, curious, creative, intellectually adventurous and risk-embracing—the very capacities that tend to disappear when the anxiety of uncertainty gets the better of us. Apparently, being able to handle ambiguity and uncertainty isn’t a function of intelligence. In fact, this ability has no relationship whatsoever to IQ. It is an emotional challenge—a question of mind-set.<sup>7</sup> I wonder if Holmes has ever read Pema Chodron’s work though he does not mention meditation as a tool to increase one’s capacity to handle uncertainty.

Holmes does mention some ways to increase one’s ability to live non-reactively with uncertainty. Measuring qualities like creativity, intellectual openness and societal growth as these qualities are the very ones that are truncated among people and cultures that cope poorly with uncertainty, Holmes reviewed the work of Dean Simonton, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis and an expert on creativity, noting that he has done

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<sup>3</sup> Chodron, Kindle Edition, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Jamie Holmes, Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing (New York, Crown Publishers, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Maria Konnikova, “Why We Need Answers” *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2013  
<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/why-we-need-answers>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, Kindle Edition, 11.

fascinating work showing that eras of artistic creativity often follow periods of openness to outside influences. Simonton's interest in creativity began in the mid-1970s, with his doctoral dissertation. Back then, he was trying to figure out exactly why creative geniuses tended to cluster in specific periods.

Why, he wondered, were there so many brilliant people in the golden and silver ages, but not in the so-called Dark Ages? What explained the seemingly disproportionate number of creative minds in Renaissance Italy, or in Islamic Baghdad during the reign of the Abbasids?

In searching for the sources of societal and cultural creativity, Simonton eventually narrowed in on multiculturalism and bilingualism. In one historical study of Japan, Simonton spliced the period between 580 and 1939 into twenty-year intervals. In each generational period, he gauged the number of eminent immigrants, the amount of travel abroad, and whether natives were influenced by outsiders.

Then he compared these ebbs and flows with fourteen measures of national achievement—in religion, business, medicine, philosophy, and art, among other areas. Openness to outside influences and the frequency of travel abroad, he found, were correlated with simultaneous gains in achievements in business and religion. Most strikingly, he also discovered that the more diversity there was in Japanese society, the more creative the society was two generations later in the areas of medicine, fiction, poetry, and painting.<sup>8</sup>

Turns out, the more we surround ourselves with others who are not like us, the more we learn different languages and ways of seeing and being in the world, the more we are able to remain open to uncertainty. It reminds us that we are not in control of the world, that the world is bigger than we are, that we are one of many, that indeed, there is much we do not and cannot know.

The more we lean into the interconnected web and leave our safe place, the more we can resist reacting when we are afraid, indeed, the less afraid we seem to become.

As Pema Chodron puts it, "What keeps us unhappy and stuck in a limited view of reality is our tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain, to seek security and avoid groundlessness, to seek comfort and avoid discomfort. This is how we keep ourselves enclosed in a cocoon....Moment after moment, we're deciding that we would rather stay in that cocoon than step out into that big space. Life in our cocoon is cozy and secure. We've gotten it all together. It's safe, it's predictable, it's convenient, and it's trustworthy. If we feel ill at ease, we just fill in those gaps. Our mind is always seeking zones of safety. We're in this zone of safety and that's what we consider life, getting it all together, security...."

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<sup>8</sup> Holmes, Kindle Edition, 206, 207.

We fear losing our illusion of security—that's what makes us anxious. We fear being confused and not knowing which way to turn. We want to know what's happening. The mind is always seeking zones of safety, and these zones of safety are continually falling apart. Then we scramble to get another zone of safety back together again. We spend all our energy and waste our lives trying to re-create these zones of safety, which are always falling apart. That's the essence of suffering...continuing to seek happiness in all the wrong places."<sup>9</sup>

True happiness comes from embracing our lives as they are: uncertain, unpredictable, vast, unreliable, unsafe, full of unknowns...and building the tools together, with others who are on this journey with us, with many others, those who are not like us too, those who dress and talk and live and worship and think differently than we do...to navigate this uncertain terrain with some level of ease and peace. I do not believe in recipes to make the terrain more certain; I think it's about just letting it all just really break our hearts once and for all. Just really, truly allowing ourselves to feel what we have been fleeing our whole lives and just sitting with it and letting it be.

In that sitting Pema Chodron reminds us, we will find that we are not alone, that we are surrounded by others just like us, vulnerable, afraid, lost, and broken hearted, and that we are full of this tenderhearted capacity to love life and each other that it is overwhelming sacred and good and has this potential to awaken us to our goodness and the goodness of one another that will just knock our socks off.

And it begins with just not running away from the fear and the uncertainty any more. That whatever we fill those moments with: television, food, sex, alcohol, shopping, talking, withdrawing....not that all of those things are not good in moderation, just that we use them in excess to keep from feeling anything at all...so that instead of doing that, we just feel it and use a tool like meditation and stillness and openheartedness and therapy and community and love...and we just feel the fear and let it teach us what it has to teach us...and then we teach each other what we've learned.

I am fond of saying that I am tired of growing; that I want time to stagnate. But after writing this I realized that it is not true. I am tired of growing in ways that are familiar to me. I am tired of being tired. I want to grow in ways that give me life and energy and hope.

I want to grow in ways that open me up to people in new and daring and unexpected ways. I want to grow in ways that challenge the story I have written for myself and others. I want to sit in fear and not turn on my favorite series and knit and talk about what we need from the grocery store with my partner. I want to stop pretending that I am not scared to death like the rest of us and see what is on the other side of that.

Heaven and hell are within our grasp my dears. Shall we seek them together? What else do we have to do in 2018 anyway? Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Chodron, Kindle Edition, 22, 23, 24.