

Showing Up for Your Life

You're jealous or angry or lonely (or sad). Don't run from the feeling says Pema Chodron. Stay Present

Traditionally, we all like to plan our life. And of course, we have to. It would become very chaotic if we just showed up for a plane or train without a ticket. But when we're dealing with emotions and fear, deciding ahead of time how it's all going to be doesn't work. Our motto needs to be: "Learn as you go."

On the path of meditation, you are training your mind and body to end up in the same place. To do that, you need the discipline of openness, which quite simply means showing up for your life. Showing up turns out to be very fertile, tender ground. You find that there is an increase in your curiosity, inquisitiveness, and interest in what's actually going on. You discover a shaky, tender quality of vulnerability that threatens to overtake you. But if you take it in small bites, if you don't have a plan of getting the shakiness over with once and for all, you may find it's workable.

Each time you stay present with fear and uncertainty, you're letting go of a habitual way of finding security and comfort. All those brain studies about meditation – where they place people in MRI machines or put electrodes on their heads – show us that each time you dare to remain where you are and do something completely fresh, unconventional, and nonhabitual, you open new pathways in the brain. You experience that as strength and it builds capacity to be open the next time around. By contrast, each time you follow your habitual approach you reinforce the old pathway and make it more likely that you'll go that way once again next time around.

And, don't worry. There will always be a next time around. We get many reruns in life, big reruns and small reruns. If your heart is gripped by jealousy or rage or loneliness or any other manifestation of fear, you don't have to learn from it all at once. It's not like if you get it right once, if you overcome your jealousy or anger once, then it's smooth sailing with the emotional pattern for the rest of your life. There will be reruns. It will keep coming back, following the old grooves in the brain. This means you have lots and lots of chances to rouse yourself and let go. No need to exaggerate an emotional pattern, fixate on it, fuel it with more thoughts, or go into a tailspin. When you feel the shakiness, when the thoughts start to arise, when the tailspin is beginning, another rerun is in progress. You simply rouse yourself and let yourself be there.

*Adapted from Pema Chodron's teachings at the Smile at Fear Retreat in the Bay Area in 2010.
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