

FEEDING YOUR DEMONS



ALSO BY TSULTRIM ALLIONE

Women of Wisdom

FEEDING YOUR DEMONS

ANCIENT WISDOM FOR
RESOLVING INNER CONFLICT



TSULTRIM ALLIONE

FOREWORD BY JACK KORNFIELD



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*For my precious mother, Ruth,
who has been a radiant example of compassion and
unconditional love throughout my life, and
for the Great Mother, Prajnaparamita,
the skylike mind, our true nature*

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FOREWORD

THERE ARE statues of fierce demons standing guard at the gates of most Buddhist temples. To enter the sacred space of the temple you must pass directly between them. This is because all humans, each of us, must come to terms with the demons of fear, aggression, temptation, ignorance, and their cohorts if we are to live a free and sacred life. They cannot be neglected.

In *Feeding Your Demons* Tsultrim Allione has performed a remarkable feat of cultural translation and offered the Western world a new treasure. She has taken a great and relatively unknown ancient lineage of practice and rendered it into accessible modern form without compromising its essence or losing its power. In this she brings to bear the depth of her forty years of Buddhist training, her skills as an accomplished lama and a visionary, her sophisticated understanding of the Western psyche, and her fearless consciousness, steeped in the two worlds of classical Tibet and modern life.

The need for transformation of our demons is universal. We all suffer at times from our personal demons, whether those of confusion, anger, self-hatred, trauma, longing, or loss. Collectively

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the force of these same demons creates enormous suffering on earth, including continuing war, racism, environmental devastation, and widespread yet unnecessary hunger and illness. To alleviate these forms of suffering, we humans will have to face the demons of greed, hatred, and delusion at their root. No amount of political or scientific change will end these sufferings unless we also learn to work with our demons, individually and collectively. Here, in the straightforward teaching offered by Tsultrim Allione, is a powerful method to do so. With exquisite detail and accuracy she shows us how we can transform the energy of addiction, shame, illness, anxiety, fear, and anger into the energy of liberation.

This transformation is at the very heart of Buddhist realization, the discovery that liberation can be found exactly where we are — not by avoiding the sufferings of life, but by turning toward them with a great heart of compassion. And by releasing our personal grasping of them, we can learn to transform their energy and find freedom in their midst.

Buddhist history tells us that after many years of teaching, the Buddha invited his most awakened followers to carry the lamp of the teachings of liberation and compassion across the world. He instructed them to translate these teachings into the vernacular of each new land so that they could bring benefit to all.

In *Feeding Your Demons* Tsultrim Allione has done so, beautifully. May the blessings and liberation offered by these practices of transforming the demons free your own heart, benefit all beings, and lead to the repair and awakening of the world. May it be so.

JACK KORNFIELD
Spirit Rock Meditation Center

FEEDING YOUR DEMONS



INTRODUCTION

FEEDING OUR DEMONS rather than fighting them might seem to contradict the conventional Western approach to what assails us, but it turns out to be a remarkably effective path to inner peace and liberation. Demons are our obsessions and fears, chronic illnesses, or common problems like depression, anxiety, and addiction. They are not bloodthirsty ghouls waiting for us in dark places; they are within us, the forces that we fight inside ourselves. They are inner enemies that undermine our best intentions. The approach of giving form to these inner forces, and feeding rather than struggling against them, was originally articulated by an eleventh-century female Buddhist teacher, Machig Labdrön (1055–1145). Her exact dates are debatable and vary according to the source, but most scholars agree she was born in 1055 and lived well into her nineties. Her spiritual practice was called Chöd (pronounced “chuh”), which means “to cut through.” She developed this form of meditation, unusual even in her time in Tibet, and it generated such amazing results that it became

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very popular, spreading to all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism and beyond.

In today's world we suffer from record levels of inner and outer struggle, and find ourselves ever more polarized politically and spiritually. We need a new paradigm, a fresh approach to conflict. Machig's strategy of nurturing rather than battling our inner and outer enemies offers a revolutionary path to resolve conflict that leads to psychological integration and inner peace.

In 1967, at age nineteen, I had the good fortune to travel to India and Nepal and meet the Tibetans who had settled there as refugees after being forced into exile during Communist China's invasion of Tibet. I fell in love with the Tibetans and returned to India in 1969 after spending six months at the first Tibetan monastery in Scotland, founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In 1970 I was ordained as a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition by His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa, in Bodhgaya, India, and for the next few years I had the immeasurable blessing of receiving teachings at the feet of many great Buddhist masters trained in Tibet. As I describe in the following pages, after several years I made the decision to return my monastic vows. It was at this time of great transition and uncertainty that I was first introduced to Chöd. I subsequently returned to America, became a mother, and sought to integrate Tibetan wisdom into my life as a layperson. I was eventually guided to discover Machig Labdrön's biography (written in Tibetan), and her teachings became pivotal for me.

Because I myself was able to find such enormous relevance in Machig's teachings, I was motivated to find a way to make her approach accessible in a Western context. When I began to teach

the Chöd practice in the West, I developed an exercise of visualizing, dialoguing with, and feeding demons that yielded tangible results. Gradually from this exercise the five-step process described here evolved into a method I call feeding your demons, which began to be used independently of the Tibetan Chöd practice by my students. For the past twenty-five years—most recently at our Colorado retreat center, Tara Mandala, in Chöd and in Kapala Training retreats—I have taught this way of feeding your demons to make friends with that which we would most like to avoid.

Those who have used the method report that chronic emotional and physical issues such as anxiety, compulsive eating, panic attacks, and illness were resolved or significantly benefited from this approach. The five-step process has also proved helpful in dealing with short-term upheavals such as the breakup of a relationship, the stress of losing a job, the death of a loved one, and interpersonal problems at work and at home. Sometimes the results have been instantaneous and seemed nothing short of miraculous, while other effects have been more gradual and subtle.

The method that I call feeding your demons—based on the principles of Chöd—is a simple five-step practice that doesn't require any knowledge of Buddhism or of any Tibetan spiritual practices. In the first step we find where in the body we hold our “demon” most strongly. This demon might be addiction, self-hatred, perfectionism, anger, jealousy, or anything that is dragging you down, draining your energy. To put it simply, our demons are what we fear. As Machig said, anything that blocks complete inner freedom is a demon. She also spoke of gods and god-

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demons. Gods are our hopes, what we are obsessed with, what we long for, our attachments. God-demons occur when a hope and a fear are closely attached to each other; when we shift back and forth between hope and fear, this is a god-demon. Although in the following pages I refer for the most part to demons, the same approach applies equally well to our gods and god-demons.

In the second step we allow the energy that we find in the body to take personified form as a demon right in front of us. In the third step we discover what the demon needs by putting ourselves in the demon's place, becoming the demon. In the fourth step we imagine dissolving our own body into nectar of whatever it is that the demon needs, and we let this flow to the demon. In this way we nurture it, feeding it to complete satisfaction. Having satisfied the demon, we find that the energy that was tied up in the demon turns into an ally. This ally offers us protection and support and then dissolves into us. At the end of the fourth step, we dissolve into emptiness, and in the fifth and final step, we simply rest in the open awareness that comes from dissolving into emptiness.

Paradoxically, feeding our gods or demons to complete satisfaction does not strengthen them; rather it allows the energy that has been locked up in them to become accessible. In this way highly charged emotions that have been bottled up by inner conflict are released and become something beneficial. When we try to fight against or repress the disowned parts of ourselves that I call demons, they actually gain power and develop resistance. In feeding our demons we are not only rendering them harmless; we are also, by addressing them instead of running away from

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them, nurturing the shadow parts of ourselves, so that the energy caught in the struggle transforms into a positive protective force.

Giving our demons form by personifying them brings inchoate energies or harmful habitual patterns into view, allowing them to be liberated rather than leaving them as invisible destructive forces. The alternative to feeding our demons is to engage in a conflict we can never win: our unfed demons only become more and more powerful and monstrous as we either openly battle them or remain ignorant of their undercover operations.

Although the therapeutic technique of personifying a fear or neurosis is not unfamiliar in Western psychology, the five-step practice of feeding your demons takes this approach deeper. Its additional value lies in dissolving our own bodies and nurturing rather than just personifying and interacting with our inner enemies, and in the experience of nondual meditative awareness that occurs in the final step of the process. This is a state of relaxed awareness, free from our usual fixation of “self” versus “other,” which takes us beyond the place where normal psychotherapy ends.

Finding appropriate ways to bring the ancient wisdom of Tibet into the contemporary world is a challenge that anyone deeply involved in the tradition must confront. At a 1996 conference in Dharamsala, India, with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, I was asked to present the practice of feeding your demons in a session devoted to new methods for teaching Buddhism in the West. I had the great honor of leading the Dalai Lama, a group of distinguished lamas (Tibetan Buddhist teachers)

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from various traditions, and my Western colleagues through a version of the five-step practice you will learn in this book. Afterward His Holiness was very encouraging, and several Western teachers adopted this method and used it in their own retreats.

This experience reinforced my sense that all Buddhist teachers, both Eastern and Western, grapple with questions about how to most effectively present the Buddha's teachings in today's world. How do we translate and interpret these teachings without losing the essential and often intangible blessings of traditional methods? How do we teach something that really helps people? Each teacher must come to his or her own conclusions, and the answers seem to run the gamut from very conservative to highly experimental. Although the nature of mind transcends time and culture, the psyche is influenced by cultural history and language, so we must address these differences to be effective in a global context. After all, Buddhism changed as it went from India to Tibet, Japan, Korea, Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and China, and it will continue to change as it goes out to the rest of the world.

My goal is to present you with something of the essence of Machig's teachings, based on what has been effective in my own experience as a Buddhist practitioner, a woman, and a teacher. This exposure may provide you with a doorway to pursuing more traditional training in Chöd, or it may stand on its own as a method to help you work with the challenges of your life. In either event, I believe Machig's approach of engaging and feeding the "enemy" provides a revolutionary paradigm shift from domination to tolerance and integration. Religious systems that set up battlegrounds internally and externally have brought us a polar-

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ized experience both within ourselves and in our ever more frightening world. No matter how many demons we try to destroy, more appear in their place; no matter how many terrorists we kill, more fill their ranks. In order to be effective we need a new model, based on compassion, inclusion, and dialogue. This approach has incredible implications, personally and collectively. Although we will focus primarily on the personal, in the last part of the book I will also touch on the collective applications of Machig Labdrön's teachings, which humankind so urgently needs in our divided world.

Having spent my life bridging East and West, I am deeply committed to both ensuring that the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism reaches the West intact *and* adapting those teachings to Western life today. I myself have continued to strictly follow the traditional teachings in my training with Tibetan lamas. But when I teach I have found it effective both to transmit the traditional teachings and to use methods that have made the teachings practical in my life as a Westerner. I believe that deemphasizing the culturally specific aspects of this ancient wisdom will make it more accessible and will benefit many who might be put off by the complexity of the Tibetan tradition.

Therefore in this book I will not be attempting to teach Chöd in its original form, since that practice requires in-person transmission from a qualified teacher, uses a bell, thighbone trumpet, and drum, and is sung in Tibetan. My focus will be on using the principles of the practice as a springboard for something applicable in modern life, something useful in relieving suffering and bringing the average person closer to inner freedom.

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My intention is that this book will communicate something of the great wisdom of my teachers and give you a living link with the teachings of Machig Labdrön. May it prove useful in your life, may it effectively help to liberate your demons, and may it ultimately contribute to the creation of a more peaceful world.