



SITTING IN THE FIRE

A stylized, light-colored graphic of flames or smoke rising from the bottom of the title 'FIRE'.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN ON TURNING TOWARD PAIN

JAMES KULLANDER

I FIRST MET PEMA CHÖDRÖN in May 1994 at Zen Mountain Monastery, a remote retreat center in the Catskill foothills of upstate New York. She was leading a retreat, and I was in the midst of a divorce. As is often the case with people going through a divorce, I was looking for answers to questions I hadn't even known I had.

A few months earlier I'd read an inspiring book called *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, by Tibetan Buddhist and Oxford scholar Chögyam Trungpa. Chögyam Trungpa had died in 1987 at the age of forty-five from cirrhosis of the liver. People told me he'd never tried to hide his alcoholism, giving talks on the Buddhist idea of, say, emptiness with a can of Colt 45 by his side. When I heard that, I remember thinking: This is my kind of spiritual teacher. The same friend who had recommended the book suggested I go on a retreat with Chödrön, who'd been a student of Chögyam Trungpa's.

"Chögyam Trungpa was a heavy drinker, and he had love affairs all the time," Chödrön recently told me. "I was both drawn to him and scared of him. The closer I got to him, the more I saw that he never gave up on anyone. And I got to a place, not

only with Chögyam Trungpa, but also with anyone, where I could not see people as all right or all wrong. He taught me to stay in the middle, a place where you're not really sure."

Perhaps it was this lesson that produced one of my favorite passages in Chödrön's book *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Shambhala): "If we really want to communicate, we have to give up knowing what to do. When we come in with our agendas, they only block us from seeing the person in front of us. It's best to drop our five-year plans and accept the awkward sinking feeling that we are entering a situation naked. We don't know what will happen next or what we'll do."

Living as best we can with constant uncertainty is the bedrock of Chödrön's teachings, and of her life. Her spoken words — her books are all edited transcripts of unscripted talks — carry within them the idea that nothing in this world is certain or solid, and the sooner you can deal with that, the better off you'll be.

Chödrön, whose Buddhist name means "Lotus Torch of the Dharma," was born Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in 1936, in New



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York City. She attended Miss Porter's School in Connecticut (which counts among its alumnae Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis) and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. She was an elementary-school teacher for many years and has two children and three grandchildren. When I asked her whether her children thought of her as a great spiritual teacher or just a mom, she smiled and said, "Just a mom."

Chödrön is resident teacher at Gampo Abbey, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery founded by Chögyam Trungpa in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She teaches very little now, however, having suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome for the past fifteen years. She spends two hundred days a year in solitary retreat in Crestone, Colorado, at a small center led by her current teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul.

Chödrön has a big, easy laugh that belies her petite frame and helps her listeners to, as she often suggests, "lighten up." She occasionally leads retreats at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, New York, where I am the executive editor. This interview was conducted on campus before her most recent three-day retreat at Omega, which attracted five hundred people — a far cry from the group of twenty at the retreat where I had first met her. She had told me that she didn't like to do interviews, but, as one of her assistants explained afterward, this was more of a conversation between friends. I was surprised to discover during the interview that, like me, she'd begun her spiritual journey during a difficult divorce.

Kullander: You've been a Buddhist monastic since 1974. That's a long way from being a wife, a mother, and an elementary-school teacher. What attracted you to Buddhism?

Chödrön: The truth is I didn't know it was Buddhism that I was attracted to initially. In 1972 I read an article by Chögyam Trungpa, who would become my principal teacher. The article made terrific sense to me, but I had no idea that he was describing Buddhism. I was living a countercultural life in northern New Mexico. There were a lot of communes around, and I explored them all. One week there'd be a Hindu swami in the neighborhood, the next a Zen roshi, the next a Native American healer, and the next a Sufi master. I really didn't distinguish between them, and no one encouraged me to do so.

Then my marriage ended, and — I've realized since then that this is fairly common — it was one of those crises where everything falls apart. I couldn't feel any ground under my feet. It was devastating.

The word *depression* was not used much back then, but I think I went into a major depression. At the time, I had no words for it. All I knew was that the pain was intense, and there was nothing I could do to get out of it. Any of the usual strategies for entertaining myself or finding comfort only exaggerated the pain. Going to a movie, eating, smoking dope — it all somehow made the pain worse.

I started looking for ways to deal with my anger, which seemed unfamiliar and out of control. The groundlessness I felt had a fearsome and panicky quality to it. I was offered plenty of advice, but it all seemed to boil down to a similar message: "Turn toward the light" or "Chant yourself into a higher consciousness." It was useless to me. If I could have simply turned toward the light, I would've done so happily.

I had two children and was teaching school at the time, and one day I came out of work and got into a friend's pickup truck. On the front seat was a magazine that Chögyam Trungpa was publishing in the 1970s. It lay open to an article titled "Working with Negativity." The first line was something like: "There's nothing wrong with negativity." I took this to mean: "There's nothing wrong with what you're going through. It's very real, and it brings you closer to the truth." The article explained that when you find yourself caught in extreme discomfort or negativity, the negativity itself is not the problem. If you can have a direct experience of that pain, it will be a great teacher for you. The problem is what Chögyam Trungpa called "negative negativity," or reacting against negativity and trying to escape it. It was the first sane advice I had heard for someone in my situation. As I read, I kept nodding and saying to myself: *This is true*. I didn't even know that Chögyam Trungpa was a Buddhist teacher, or that it was Buddhism I was reading about. Once I connected with it, though, I never looked back. I felt — and I still feel — as if I had connected with an unfinished story, or rediscovered a path that I'd lost long ago.

After I'd read that article, I moved up to the Lama Foun-



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dation in northern New Mexico for the summer. (My children were with their father.) I remember seeing Allen Ginsberg drive up in his Volkswagen Bug with Tsultrim Allione, who was then a Tibetan nun. When she got out of the car, I was struck by her robes and everything about her. It was almost a physical shock. And I remember thinking to myself: *What is this?* I hardly remember Allen at all. I started talking with Tsultrim, and I must have mentioned the article, or maybe she mentioned that her teacher was Chögyam Trungpa. She said that if I wanted to meet him, I could come with her up to Boulder, Colorado, where he taught.

I would have done it, but a few days later an old boyfriend of mine arrived at the Lama Foundation and told me that he was on his way to a Sufi camp in the French Alps. Because I was still in enormous pain over my divorce, I wanted to go with him. I was jumping blind, looking for some sort of help. All my friends told me I was crazy just to go off like that. But it turned out I wasn't crazy.

A Tibetan Buddhist lama came to the camp. His name was Lama Chime. When I saw him, I had the same experience that I'd had with Tsultrim. His talk didn't make any sense to me, but the minute it was over I went up to him and asked, "Could I study with you?" He didn't have a center or anything like that, but he lived in London and said if I came there, he would give me some instruction. After I'd been with Lama Chime for two weeks, I took refuge, a vow through which one formally enters the Buddhist path. Then I took the bodhisattva vow, a personal vow to seek enlightenment and help others do the same. Two years later I was a nun. I thought I was so worldly-wise. I was only thirty-six years old.

Kullander: Do you recall having any early spiritual or religious inclinations?

Chödrön: I have no memories of any childhood spiritual aspirations, though I was raised Catholic. But some friends I grew up with say that they always thought of me as a spiritual person. For example, one woman I know from those days once said to me: "When my cousin died, you were the only one who really sat down with me and talked with me about the fact that my very close relative had drowned." We must have been fifteen years old at the time.

Kullander: So even back then you were drawn toward painful experiences.

Chödrön: I guess so. But what I really remember from the 1950s is everyone always smiling. It wasn't until I studied Freud in college that I had any inkling there was anything below the surface.

Kullander: Freud observed that we're awfully hard on ourselves, that we judge ourselves and others all the time. Do you think this sort of judging is inherent in human nature, or is it something learned?

Chödrön: Several years ago the Dalai Lama was in a conference with Western Buddhist teachers. At one point, meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg brought up the subject of self-hatred. She said it was a major issue that had to be addressed by anybody teaching Buddhism in the West. The Dalai Lama didn't know what she was talking about. So he went around the room and asked the other Western teachers about it, and every one of them agreed with her. Self-hatred was something that the Dalai Lama literally didn't understand.

The first noble truth of the Buddha is that people experience *dukkha*, a feeling of dissatisfaction or suffering, a feeling that something is wrong. We feel this dissatisfaction because we're not in tune with our true nature, our basic goodness. And we aren't going to be fundamentally, spiritually content until we get in tune. Dzigar Kongtrul, my teacher for the past five years, says that only in the West is this dissatisfaction articulated as "Something is wrong with me." It seems that thinking of oneself as flawed is more a Western phenomenon than a universal one. And if you're teaching Western students, it has to be addressed, because until that self-hatred is at least partially healed, people can't experience absolute truth.

Kullander: Why not?

Chödrön: Because they will misinterpret the groundlessness of absolute truth. People will think there is something wrong with them.

Kullander: This self-criticism seems difficult to avoid. You don't just wake up one day and say to yourself, "I'm going to stop being self-critical." If you drop a jar at the grocery store, and it breaks, you automatically think, *Oh, what a clumsy fool I am.*



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Chödrön: I think it's much deeper than thinking you're clumsy. I have my own theory about this, actually, based on personal experience. I was in a close relationship once with somebody who I felt disliked me very much, and I couldn't get out of it. What's more, this person was inaccessible and wouldn't talk to me about the problem. That combination of feeling disliked and having no chance to discuss it made me feel there was something terribly wrong with me, that I was a bad person.

I tried all the meditation techniques that I had been teaching people, but nothing would relieve the pain I was feeling. It was similar to the pain I'd felt when my husband had left me. So I went up to the meditation hall where I was practicing at the time, and I just sat there. I did not do any particular meditation. I just sat there in the middle of this pain, bolt upright, all night long.

And I had an insight. The first thing was that I felt physically like a little child, so small that if I'd sat in a chair my feet wouldn't have touched the floor. And then there was a recognition that I needed to relax into the pain. Until then, I had avoided going to this place where I felt bad or unacceptable or unloved. No language could express how awful that place felt. But I just started breathing into it. I realized that this was a pivotal moment. Somehow, even with the divorce, I had never quite hit the bottom. And that evening, I did. I was seconds away from experiencing the death feeling.

Kullander: The death feeling?

Chödrön: The deepest level of the dissatisfaction we all feel, and that Westerners misinterpret as something being wrong with them. But as I relaxed into that feeling, it passed through me. And I didn't die. It passed right through. That was a big moment for me. I realized that resistance to the idea that I was unlovable only made the pain worse.

Kullander: So you use your own life as the ground for your spiritual practice.

Chödrön: There isn't anything except your own life that can be used as ground for spiritual practice. Spiritual practice is your life, twenty-four hours a day. There's no time off. We do formal practice — meditation — because it brings us closer to those states of mind we experience in our lives during times of crisis. For instance, when I sat there that whole night, I was not running from what was happening to my body

and mind. There wasn't any distraction from it, not even to brush my teeth or pee. It was just a moment-by-moment experience of the present.

In Buddhism, there's this idea called the *alaya*. It's similar to Jung's theory of the universal unconscious. *Alaya* is a Sanskrit word used to describe a personal storehouse of consciousness. It contains the essence of how we perceive the world and the experiences of our individual lives, and everything that happens to us arises from it. The seeds of everything you think and say and do are buried there. And if the causal conditions come together, certain seeds will ripen. That's what happened to me that night.

Kullander: Do you keep coming up against painful habits and experiences?

Chödrön: Yes, but there are fewer and fewer of them because those seeds are being burned up.

Kullander: It must be a tremendous relief.

Chödrön: Yes and no. For a Buddhist, negative emotions are something to work with. There's a joke about bodhisattvas, who are a kind of spiritual warrior in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition: The biggest problem for bodhisattvas is that they don't have much to work with anymore, because fewer and fewer things trigger their negative emotions. It's humorous because this is everyone else's dream come true, but it's a big problem for bodhisattvas. I'm not saying that I'm at that level, but I do know from personal experience that life can become smoother.

I once asked a spiritual teacher what happens as your life gets smoother, and he said you have to up the ante and go into more-and-more-difficult situations. You have the capacity to go into the hell realms of the world and help the people there because you're less triggered by how awful things are. As your own life gets smoother, you can move closer to people who are in severe mental or physical anguish, because you no longer have any fear of it, and therefore you can be of some help.

Kullander: Have you been doing that?

Chödrön: I'm embarrassed to say I haven't really gone looking for such situations. Anytime a painful situation is presented to me, I jump right into it. But I haven't become a political activist or worked in homeless shelters, and I don't know if I will, because I'm getting older and my health isn't so good. All I can say is that whenever pain is presented to



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me, minor or major, I'm eager to work with it.

Kullander: Turning toward pain instead of avoiding it is a common theme in your books.

Chödrön: Yes, because I realized what a source of happiness turning toward pain actually is. Our avoidance of pain keeps us locked in a cycle of suffering. The Buddha said that what we take to be solid isn't really solid. It's fluid. It's dynamic energy. And not only do we take our opponents and obstacles to be solid, we also believe ourselves to be solid or permanent. In the West, we add the belief that the self is bad. That night I spent meditating, I discovered that there is no solid, bad me. It's all just ineffable experience.

Kullander: Is this experience what Buddhists would call "emptiness"?

Chödrön: I don't use Buddhist language very much, but yes, Buddhists would call it "emptiness" or "*shunyata*" or "egolessness." I would say I experienced the fluidity of what I once thought of as a solid self. And I actually experienced it in a traditional Buddhist way, by staying with the immediacy of my experience and not going off on story lines, as we are always doing. These stories we make up about ourselves distance us from the rawness of our immediate experience.

What we think of as our worst nightmares are what

spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle would call "portals." They are doorways that can take you to a different state of mind. Typically what happens when we experience pain is that our habit of avoiding pain gets stronger, or the pain gives birth to other sorrow-producing habits based on the fiction that there's something wrong. But when you taste experience fully the way I did that night, the doorway opens into what I would call "a timeless now."

There's nothing wrong with our thoughts and emotions except that we identify with them and make them seem solid. But if you don't identify with them, you begin to see life as a sort of movie in which you are the main character. It still has plot and conflict — there's no other way it could be — but you don't have this tight grip on it all. We need to let the story line go and have an immediate experience of what's actually happening, without blaming ourselves or anyone else.

This is an important message for Westerners, because we get hooked on a story about a problem. In Tibetan Buddhism this hooked feeling is called *shenpa*. It's an urge, a knee-jerk response that we keep repeating over and over again. We lose our balance and intelligence. But you can notice when it happens. You can acknowledge it. You can catch yourself. You can do something different, choose a fresh alternative. Because



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if you do what you've always done, you're never going to get unhooked.

I advise people to stay with the immediacy of their experience when *shenpa* arises. One way is just to start breathing in and out. It doesn't have to be a big spiritual act, just something to replace your usual reaction. Eventually, if you don't have the habitual response, then the urge passes. You're on to something else. When you don't have the habitual reaction, you're actually burning up those seeds in the *alaya*. Then there are two possible outcomes: one is that the urge disappears; you don't have that particular desire to eat chocolate cake anymore, or to make a mean remark. The other outcome is that the urge still arises, but you don't invest it with much meaning.

Kullander: But you're not going to get anywhere unless you practice.

Chödrön: Yes, meditation practice is the key. But some people can meditate for years and years and years and still burn no seeds. They are stuck on an image of themselves as good meditators, or good Buddhists. To burn up the seeds of *shenpa*, one must sit in the middle of the fire.

Zen teacher Ezra Bayda does a practice one day a week in which he does not speak or act out of negativity, no matter what happens. You might think that's repressive, but it

heightens the awareness of how you otherwise speak and act in ways that strengthen the negativity. If you've taken this vow, you can say: "It's Wednesday. I can't do that." As a result, you discover what it feels like to burn the karmic seeds of negative mind and negative speech and negative action.

We need to break these habits that keep us locked in a cycle of suffering. We have this sense of the self as solidly right and righteous, which would not be such a problem except that it adds up to enormous suffering at the personal level, and at the global level.

Kullander: We had a national painful experience on September 11, 2001. Where were you, and what was your reaction to the attacks?

Chödrön: I had just entered a hundred-day retreat. I had been there only four days. My first reaction was shock and enormous sorrow, like what I'd felt when my husband had left me. I knew that countless people — particularly in New York — were going to find it impossible to get the ground back under their feet. Yet it was an enormous opportunity for people to wake up out of a trance, and many, many people did just that.

I also knew that there probably would be a strong conservative backlash, and I felt great sorrow about that too. I didn't have any feeling of there being an enemy, of us-versus-them. Sometimes the seeds of *alaya* also ripen for nations,



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and to me that's what happened. I felt sorrow for everybody on all sides.

Kullander: Buddhism espouses nonviolence. Yet we're living, it seems, in an increasingly violent world. How is it possible to remain peaceful in such a violent world?

Chödrön: You have to want to lose your appetite for violence or aggression. And to do that, you have to lose your self-righteousness. You have to realize that you cannot continue to have your habitual reaction to something, especially if your reaction ends with violence — physical or verbal — against yourself or somebody else, or even against the government of your country or the terrorists or whomever. You have to accept in your gut that the habitual reaction is poisonous not only to you but to the rest of the world.

Some people are waking up to this because they see the repercussions of violence in the world today. But I also see more and more people looking for ways to justify their aggression. I hear them say, "Yes, but this time I'm right." That's our self-righteousness talking. It is the voice of the fundamentalist within us. People need a lot of encouragement before they can silence that voice. Most of them can't get rid of it right away. They keep getting stuck in the story line. But we're not working with right and wrong. We're working with a change at the core of our being. When you make this change, the habitual pattern that causes you to think that something is right or wrong no longer has power over you. You're no longer a slave to it.

Some people find this message powerful, but the next time someone angers them, they start to get self-righteous again. I say to them, "You're sowing those seeds that are going to cause you and others great unhappiness, and you're cutting yourself off from your basic goodness." And they'll pause and say, "You're right." But many of them are still unwilling to give up their story line. They say, "Sometimes you have to be practical. Sometimes there are things that have to be done." The urge to follow that deep groove is very strong.

Kullander: I think another such deep groove is the idea that we've got to get them before they get us. So it's not only self-righteousness or self-justification; it's self-preservation.

Chödrön: That's what's happening now on an international

scale, particularly with the United States and the Middle East. It's a mirror of what's happening at the individual level. What we call "ego," or the sense of a solid self, we could just as well call "self-preservation." It's the same thing at the international level. Self-preservation leads you to think you must have homeland security, which is synonymous with all of those habitual patterns I've been talking about. And you become more and more cut off from your basic heart, your basic wisdom, your basic interconnectedness with other people.

We follow habitual reactions because we don't want to feel the groundlessness of a given situation. But Buddhism teaches that everything is always groundless. If we can know that, and befriend that, then happiness is possible. Trying to avoid groundlessness only leads to violence.

Kullander: What would you like to have seen happen after the 9/11 attacks?

Chödrön: I would like to have seen a large number of people realize that the groundlessness they were experiencing was the truth; that it didn't have to be a nightmare; that they could relax into it. In the early days after the attacks, I heard people say that the only thing that made sense was to be kind to each other. That's what happens when we relax into groundlessness: suddenly the only thing that makes sense is to be kind to each other.

It's beyond my ability to say exactly what we should have done. But the Dalai Lama urged President Bush not to go to war because aggression only breeds aggression. Each of us needs to realize what seeds caused such a tragedy to happen in the first place. And then we can start burning up the seeds of aggression rather than escalating the violence, which will only put us in a worse place in the future.

I would like to have seen an awareness of cause and effect at the global level. September 11 could have been a moment of truth, of ultimate groundlessness. We could have begun to burn up the seeds of aggression rather than sow more; we could have created greater peace and harmony between people instead of more hatred and polarization. We all have to beware of fundamentalism, this self-righteousness that tells us everything is somebody else's fault. ■