

Feeding Your Demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict

by Tsultrim Allione

(230 pp., Little, Brown & Co., 2008, \$23.99)

Reviewed by Sandy Boucher

Tsultrim Allione has made excellent use of the twenty-five years since publication of her groundbreaking first book, *Women of Wisdom*. Guided by her teacher Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, she teaches using a number of modalities drawn from the female lineage in Tibetan Buddhism. Most powerful among these is chöd practice, invented by the eleventh-century female teacher Machig Labdron. (Allione's connection with Machig is so strong that she was recognized this year in a monastery in Tibet as an emanation of this great teacher.) Allione's new book, *Feeding Your Demons*, is a presentation of Machig's practice.

I first encountered chöd in Alexandra David-Neel's *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, where she tells of watching a practitioner in a graveyard in the middle of the night perform this radical practice of "cutting." Letting go of the ego, he (symbolically) cut up his body and mind, boiled them in a skull-pot, and fed the resulting nectar to attendant demons.

Terrifying, I thought—certainly not a practice that I or any of my Western Buddhist friends would attempt! But now, Allione makes this practice accessible and teaches us how to perform it.

Chöd is a powerful method for cutting the threads binding us to our obsessions and programmed responses. A core Buddhist tenet underlies the practice: that we do not deny or run away from our suffering, but instead we turn toward it. That's easy to say, but how do we do this?

Allione, through her decades of work with students and her passionate desire to make the teachings available to Westerners, has created a set of practices to confront our demons. In *Feeding Your Demons* she encourages us to engage in a healing encounter with ourself that can lead to revelation and peace. The demons we encounter here are not the flame-shrouded, gore-dripping figures from thangkas: they are the all-too-familiar energies of our everyday life—fear,

addiction, self-hatred, illness, anger, jealousy, depression, perfectionism—the tendencies or patterns that trip us up and drag us down.

Allione's five-step method for working with these demons carries echoes of Gestalt therapy and other therapeutic modalities, but it goes further, asking us to “feed” our demons, a somewhat counterintuitive move that yields surprising results. From the early steps of identifying a particular demon, then visualizing it and engaging it in dialog to ask it what it desires, we are directed to become the demon and tell ourself what we, as demon, want. Then we as ourself imagine that our body is dissolving into a nectar that carries the particular quality—perhaps kindness or peace, relaxation, compassion—that the demon desires. We feed the demon this nectar. When it is satisfied, it may transform into an ally. Now we ask questions of the ally: How will you help me? How can I access you when I need you? Finally we and the ally dissolve into each other, and we relax and rest.

In her practical, down-to-earth instructions, Allione slowly develops the steps, explaining and elaborating each maneuver, using examples of people she has worked with to illustrate the possible content and permutations of individuals' engagement with chöd practice. Each step is clearly articulated, the discussion and examples illuminating.

While I have not experienced this process myself, Tsultrim convinces me in her lucid new book that chöd practice can help us embrace our difficulties and arrive at a more compassionate acceptance of ourselves. In her desire to help us heal, she has taken the formerly daunting chöd practice of her forebear Machig Labdron and made it her own through years of practice and teaching. In *Feeding Your Demons* she offers us the resulting gift.

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