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Feeding Your Demons - Tsultrim Allione

Five steps to transforming your obstacles—your addictions, anxieties, and fears—into tranquility and wisdom, from Tsultrim Allione

Artwork by Andrew Guenther

DEMONS are not bloodthirsty ghouls waiting for us in dark places; they are within us, the forces that we find inside ourselves, the core of which is ego-clinging. Demons are our obsessions and fears, feelings of insecurity, chronic illnesses, or common problems like depression, anxiety, and addiction. Feeding our demons rather than fighting them may seem to contradict the conventional approach of attacking and attempting to eliminate that which assails us, but it turns out to be a remarkable alternative and an effective path to liberation from all dichotomies.

In my own process of learning and applying the practice of Chöd, which was originated by the eleventh-century Tibetan yogini Machig Lapdrön [*see sidebar on page 43*], I realized that demons—or maras as they are called in Buddhism—are not exotic beings like those seen in Asian scroll paintings. They are our present fears and obsessions, the issues and emotional reactivity of our own lives. Our demons, all stemming from the root demon of ego-clinging, but manifesting in an infinite variety of ways, might come from the conflicts we have with our lover, anxiety we feel when we fly, or the discomfort we feel when we look at ourselves in the mirror. We might have a demon that makes us fear abandonment or a demon that causes us to hurt the ones we love.

Demons are ultimately generated by the mind and, as such, have no independent existence. Nonetheless, we engage with them as though they were real, and we believe in their existence—ask anyone who has fought an addiction or anxiety attacks. Demons show up in our lives whether we provoke them or not, whether we want them or not. Even common parlance refers to demons, such as a veteran who is home “battling his demons” of post-traumatic stress from the war in Iraq. I recently heard a woman say she was fighting her “jealousy demon.” Unfortunately, the habit of fighting our demons only gives them

strength. By feeding, not fighting, our demons, we are integrating these energies, rather than rejecting them and attempting to distance ourselves from disowned parts of ourselves, or projecting them onto others.

The Practice of the Five Steps of Feeding Your Demons

WHEN I began to teach the Chöd practice in the West twenty-five years ago, I developed an exercise of visualizing and feeding “personal” demons so that the idea of demons would be relevant and applicable for Westerners. This exercise evolved into a five-step process, which began to be used independently of the Tibetan Chöd practice. My students told me that this method helped them greatly with chronic emotional and physical issues such as anxiety, compulsive eating, panic attacks, and illness. When they told me the five-step process also helped in dealing with upheavals such as the end of a relationship, the stress of losing a job, the death of a loved one, and interpersonal problems at work and at home, I realized that this exercise had a life of its own outside of teaching the traditional Chöd practice.

When we obsess about weight issues or become drained by a relationship or crave a cigarette, we give our demons strength, because we aren't really *paying attention* to the demon. When we understand how to feed the demon's real need with fearless generosity, the energy tied up in our demon will tend to dissolve and become an ally, like the demons that attacked Machig and subsequently became her aides.

Feeding a demon will take about half an hour. Choose a quiet place where you feel safe and comfortable. Arrange a time when you won't be interrupted. Set up two chairs or two cushions opposite each other: one for you and one for the demon and ally. Once you're set up you will want to keep your eyes closed until the end of the fifth step, so put the two seats (chairs or cushions) close enough to each other that you can feel the one in front of you with your eyes closed. Keeping your eyes closed will help you stay focused and present as you imagine this encounter with your demon. However, until you know the steps by heart, you may need to glance at the instructions.

Begin by generating the motivation to do the practice for the benefit of all beings. Then take nine deep abdominal breaths, which means breathing in deeply until you can feel your abdomen expand. Place your hands on your stomach and notice it rise and fall. As you inhale during the first three breaths, imagine your breath traveling to any physical tension you are holding in your body and then imagine the exhalation carrying this tension away. During the next three breaths release any emotional tension you might be carrying with the exhalation and in the last three breaths release any mental tension such as worries or concepts that are blocking you. Now you are ready for the five steps.

Step one: Find the Demon

In the first step you will find where **in your body** you hold the demon. Your demon might be an illness, an addiction, a phobia, perfectionism, anger, depression, or anything that is dragging you down, draining your energy. So first decide what you will work with. Finding the demon in your body takes you out of your head into a direct somatic experience. Think about the issue or demon you've decided to work with and let your awareness scan your body from head to toe, without any judgments, simply being aware of the sensations that are present. Locate **where you are holding this energy** by noticing where your attention goes in your body when you think about this issue. Once you find the feeling, **intensify** it, **exaggerate** it. Here are some questions to ask yourself: *What color is it? What shape does it have? Does it have a texture? What is its temperature? If it emitted a sound, what would it be? If it had a smell, what would it be?*

Step two: Personify the Demon and Ask It What It Needs

In the second step you invite the demon to move from being simply a collection of sensations, colors, and textures that you've identified inside your body to becoming a **living entity** sitting right in front of you. As a personified form appears, a figure or a monster, notice its color, size, expression and especially the look in its eyes. Don't try to control or decide what it will look like; let your unconscious mind produce the image. If something comes up that seems silly, like a cliché or a cartoon character, don't dismiss it or try to change it. Work with whatever

form shows up *without editing* it. Then ask three questions aloud in the following order: **What do you want from me? What do you need from me? How will you feel if you get what you need?** Once you have asked these questions, immediately change places with the demon. You need to **become the demon to know the answers.**

Step three: Become the Demon

In the third step, you will discover what the demon needs by putting yourself in the demon's place, actually changing places and allowing yourself to see things from the demon's point of view. With your eyes still closed, move to the seat you have set up in front of you, facing your original seat, and imagine yourself as the demon. Take a deep breath or two and feel yourself becoming this demon. Vividly recall the being that was personified in front of you and imagine you are "in the demon's shoes." Take a moment to adjust to your new identity before answering the three questions.

Then answer the three questions aloud in the first person, looking at an imagined form of your ordinary self in front of you, like this: **"What I want from you is . . . What I need from you is . . . When my need is met, I will feel . . ."**

It's very important that these questions make the distinction between *wants* and *needs*, because many demons will want your life force, or everything good in your life, or to control you, but that's not what they *need*. Often what they need is hidden beneath what they say they want, which is why we ask the second question, probing a little deeper. The demon of alcoholism might want alcohol but need something quite different, like safety or relaxation. **Until we get to the need underlying the craving, the craving will continue.**

In response to the question "What do you need?" the stress demon might respond: "What I actually need is to feel secure."

Having learned that beneath the stress demon's desire to hurry and do more lies a need to feel secure, you still must find out how the demon will feel if it gets what it needs. This will tell you what to feed the

demon. Thus, having been asked "How will you feel if you get what you need?" the stress demon might answer: "I will feel like I can let go and finally relax." Now you know to feed this demon relaxation. *By feeding the demon the emotional feeling that underlies the desire for the substance, we address the core issue instead of just the symptoms.*

Step four: Feed the Demon and Meet the Ally

Now we've reached the crucial moment when we actually feed the demon. Return to your original position and face the demon. Take a moment to settle back into your own body before you envision the demon in front of you again.

Begin by imagining that your consciousness is separating from your body so that it is as if your consciousness is outside your body and just an observer of this process. *Then imagine your body melting into nectar that consists of whatever the demon has told you it ultimately will feel if it gets what it needs*, so the nectar consists of the answer to the third question in step three. For example, the demon might have said it will *feel* powerful, or loved, or accepted when it gets what it needs. So the nectar should be just that: You offer nectar of the feeling of power, love, or acceptance.

Now feed the demon this nectar, give free rein to your imagination in seeing how the nectar will be absorbed by the demon. See the demon drinking in your offering of nectar through its mouth or through the pores of its skin, or taking it in some other way. *Continue imagining the nectar flowing into the demon*; imagine that there is an infinite supply of this nectar, and that you are offering it with a feeling of *limitless generosity*. While you feed your demon, *watch it carefully*, as it is likely to begin to change. Does it look different in any way? Does it morph into a new being altogether?

At the moment of total satiation, its appearance usually changes significantly. It may become something completely new or disappear into smoke or mist. What happens when the demon is completely satisfied? There's nothing it's "supposed" to do, so just observe what happens; let the process unfold without trying to create a certain outcome. Whatever

develops will arise spontaneously when the demon is fed to its complete satisfaction. *It is important that the demon be fed to complete satisfaction.* If your demon seems insatiable, just imagine how it would look if it were completely satisfied; this bypasses our tendency to hold on to our demons.

The next part of step four is the appearance of an ally. A satisfied demon may transform directly into a benevolent figure, which may be the ally. The ally could be an animal, a bird, a human, a mythic god or bodhisattva, a child, or a familiar person. Ask this figure if it is the ally. If it replies it is not, then invite an ally to appear. Or the demon may have disappeared, leaving no figure behind. If so, you can still meet the ally by inviting an ally to appear in front of you.

Once you clearly see the ally, ask it the following questions: **How will you serve me? What pledge or commitment will you make to me? How will you protect me? How can I gain access to you?**

Then change places and become the ally, just as you became the demon in step three. Having become the ally, take a moment to fully inhabit this body. Notice how it feels to be the protective guardian. Then, speaking as the ally, answer the questions above. Try to be as *specific* as possible in your answers.

Once the ally has articulated how it will serve and protect you, and how you can summon it, return to your original place. Take a moment to settle back into yourself, seeing the ally in front of you. Then imagine you are receiving the help and the commitment the ally has pledged. Feel this supportive energy enter you and take effect.

Finally, imagine the ally itself melting into you and feel its deeply nurturing essence integrating with you. Notice how you feel when the ally has dissolved into you. **Realize that the ally is actually an inseparable part of you**, and then allow yourself to dissolve into emptiness, which will naturally take you to the fifth and final step.

Step five: Rest in Awareness

When you have finished feeding the demon to complete satisfaction and the ally has been integrated, you and the ally dissolve into emptiness. Then you just *rest*. When the thinking mind takes a break for even a few seconds, a kind of relaxed awareness replaces the usual stream of thoughts. We need to encourage this and not fill this space with anything else; just let it be. Some people describe the fifth step as peace, others as freedom, and yet others as a great vastness. I like calling it "the gap," or the space between thoughts. Usually when we experience the gap we have a tendency to want to fill it up immediately; we are uncomfortable with empty space. In the fifth step, rather than filling this space, rest there. Even if this open awareness only occurs for a moment, it's the beginning of knowing your true nature.

Although the method of personifying a fear or neurosis is not unfamiliar in Western psychology, the value of the five-step practice of feeding your demons is quite different, beginning with the generation of an altruistic motivation, followed by the body offering (which works directly with ego-clinging) and finally the experience of non-dual meditative awareness in the final step of the process. This state of relaxed awareness, free from our usual fixation of "self" versus "other," takes us beyond the place where normal psychotherapeutic methods end.

Direct Liberation of Demons

Once we have practiced feeding the demons for some time, we begin to become aware of demons as they form. We learn to see them coming: "Ah, here comes my self-hatred demon." This makes it possible—with some practice—to liberate demons as they arise without going through the five steps, by using what is called "direct liberation." This most immediate and simple route to liberating demons takes you straight to the fifth step, but it is also the most difficult to do effectively.

Direct liberation is deceptively simple. It involves noticing the arising energy or thoughts and then turning your awareness directly toward it without giving it form as we do in the five steps. *This is the energetic equivalent of turning a boat directly into the wind when sailing; the boat travels because of its resistance to the wind and stops when its power source has been neutralized.* Similarly, if you turn your awareness

directly *into* an emotion it stops developing. This doesn't mean you are analyzing it or thinking about it but rather turning toward it with clear awareness. At this point, if you are able to do it correctly, the demon will instantly be liberated and vanish on the spot. **The technique of direct liberation is comparable to being afraid of a monster in the dark and then turning on the light. When the light goes on we see that there never was a monster in the first place, that it was just a projection of our own mind.**

Let's take the example of a demon of jealousy. I notice, "Ah, I'm getting jealous, my heart rate is increasing. My body is tensing." If at that moment I turn toward the energy of jealousy and bring my full awareness to it, the jealousy will pop like a balloon. When we feed a demon using the five steps, by the time you get to the fifth step both you and the demon have dissolved into emptiness and there is just vast awareness. Here we are short-circuiting the demon as it arises by meeting its energy consciously as soon as it surfaces, going directly to the fifth step.

Another example of a situation in which you might practice direct liberation would be an interaction with other people. You might be sitting with your lover, for instance, when you discover that something he committed to doing has not even been started. You feel irritation welling up. But then if you turn your awareness to this sensation of irritation, looking right at it, it disappears.

One way I explain direct liberation at my retreats is through an experiment. You might try it. Consciously generate a strong emotion—anger, sadness, disappointment, or desire. When you get this feeling, intensify it, and then turn your awareness directly to that emotion and rest in the experience that follows. Liberation of the demon can be so simple and instantaneous that you will distrust the result, but check back on it, and, if you have done it correctly, the emotion will have dissolved.

With considerable practice the next stage becomes possible: Here immediate awareness, clear and unmodified, is already stable, not something you just glimpse periodically. At this stage, you don't have to

“do” anything; awareness simply meets emotions as they arise so that they are naturally liberated. Emptiness, clarity, and awareness are spontaneously present. Emotions don't get hold of you; they arise and are liberated simultaneously. This is called instant liberation. An emotion arises but finds no foothold and dissolves. *At this point we have no need for feeding demons, because we are governed by awareness, rather than by our emotions.*

The process of acknowledging our collective demons begins with our personal demons—universal fears, paranoia, prejudices, arrogance, and other weaknesses. Families, groups, nations, and even society as a whole can create demons that are the sum of unresolved individual demons. If we do not acknowledge these personal demons, our weaknesses and fears can join those of others to become something monstrous.

Through shifting our perspective away from attacking our enemies and defending our territory to feeding our demons, we can learn to stay in dialogue with the enemy and find peaceful solutions. In this way we begin a quiet revolution. Drawing on the inspiration of the teachings of an eleventh-century yogini, we can change our world.

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