



JACQUELINE VÉISSID

SITTING IN THE 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



PEMA CHÖDRÖN

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-



THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH OF THE BUDDHA IS THAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE *DUKKA*, A FEELING OF DISSATISFACTION OR SUFFERING, A FEELING THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG. . . . ONLY IN THE WEST IS THIS DISSATISFACTION ARTICULATED AS “SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH ME.”

ation 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 bodhi-sattva 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.

(end of excerpt)