

Confess your hidden faults.
Approach what you find repulsive.
Help those you think you cannot help.
Anything you are attached to, let it go.
Go to places that scare you.

—ADVICE FROM HER TEACHER
TO THE TIBETAN YOGINI
MACHIK LABDRÖN

The Places That Scare You

*A Guide to Fearlessness
in Difficult Times*

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upheaval. If we feel distress, embarrassment, or anger, we think we've really blown it. Yet feeling emotional upheaval is not a spiritual faux pas; it's the place where the warrior learns compassion. It's where we learn to stop struggling with ourselves. It's only when we can dwell in these places that scare us that equanimity becomes unshakable.

The far enemy of equanimity is prejudice. We get self-righteous about our beliefs and set ourselves solidly for or against others. We take sides. We become closed-minded. We have enemies. This polarization is an obstacle to the genuine equanimity that informs compassionate action. If we wish to alleviate injustice and suffering, we have to do it with an unprejudiced mind.

The heart practices set us up to become intimately acquainted with the near and far enemies. Our training is almost like inviting them to visit. As we move closer to our genuine ability to rejoice, we get to know our jealousy and resentment. As we start training in opening our hearts, we get a close look at prejudice and indifference. When we go through the stages of aspiration, these closed-down feelings become more vivid.

These enemies are good teachers that show us that we can accept ourselves and others complete with imperfections. We develop trust in our open and forgiving mind. In doing so, we discover the strength that allows us to enter into the suffering of the world.

FOURTEEN

Fresh Start

We are all children of the Great Spirit, we all belong to Mother Earth. Our planet is in great trouble and if we keep carrying old grudges and do not work together, we will all die.

— CHIEF SEATTLE

*F*orgiveness is an essential ingredient of bodhi-chitta practice. It allows us to let go of the past and make a fresh start.

When a close friend of mine was dying, a Tibetan teacher told her to review her life with honesty and compassion. This process led her to some pretty dark places, corners of her mind where she was stuck in guilt and resentment. The teacher then instructed her in forgiveness, saying that the most important thing to do was to forgive herself. He suggested that she do a variation on tonglen. She should begin by visualizing herself and then intentionally bring up all her life's regrets. The point was not to dwell in painful memories but to contact the feelings underlying the pain: guilt or shame, confusion or remorse. The feelings didn't have to be named; she was to contact the stuckness in a nonverbal way.

The next step was to breathe these feelings into her heart, opening it as wide as she possibly could, and then to send herself forgiveness.

After that, she was to think of others feeling the same anguish and to breathe their pain and hers into her heart and to send everyone forgiveness. My friend found this to be a healing process. It allowed her to make amends with those she had hurt and those who had hurt her. She was able to let go of her shame and anger before she died.

A woman who came to Gampo Abbey for a tonglen retreat had suffered severe sexual abuse from her father. She strongly identified with caged birds; she told me that she often felt like a bird in a cage. During tonglen, she would breathe in the feeling of being small and caged; on the outbreath she would open the door and let all the birds out. One day as she was sending and taking in this way, she experienced one of the birds flying out and landing on a man's shoulder. Then the man turned around and she saw it was her father. For the first time in her life she was able to forgive him.

Forgiveness, it seems, cannot be forced. When we are brave enough to open our hearts to ourselves, however, forgiveness will emerge.

There is a simple practice we can do to cultivate forgiveness. First we acknowledge what we feel—shame, revenge, embarrassment, remorse. Then we forgive ourselves for being human. Then, in the spirit of not wallowing in the pain, we let go and make a fresh start. We don't have to carry the burden with us anymore. We can acknowledge, forgive, and start anew. If we practice this way, little by little we'll learn to abide with the feeling of regret for having hurt ourselves and others. We will also learn self-forgiveness. Eventually, at our own speed, we'll even find our capacity to forgive those who have done us harm. We will discover forgiveness as a natural expression of the open heart, an expression of our basic goodness. This potential is inherent in every moment. Each moment is an opportunity to make a fresh start.

FIFTEEN

Strength

Practice the five strengths,
The condensed heart instructions.

—MIND-TRAINING SLOGAN OF ATISHA

The five strengths are *strong determination*, *familiarization* with the bodhichitta teachings and practices, *the seed of goodness* that is found in every living being, the practice of *reproach*, and the power of *aspiration*. These are five ways that a warrior increases confidence and inspiration.

Strong determination is our commitment to use our lives to dissolve the indifference, aggression, and grasping that separate us from one another. It is a commitment to respect whatever life brings. As warriors-in-training we develop wholehearted determination to use discomfort as an opportunity for awakening, rather than trying to make it disappear. How do we abide with disagreeable emotions without retreating into our familiar strategies? How do we catch our thoughts before they become 100 percent believable and solidify into “us” against “them”? Where do we find the