

PEMA
CHÖDRÖN

WELCOMING
the UNWELCOME

WHOLEHEARTED LIVING IN A
BROKENHEARTED WORLD

WELCOMING *the*
UNWELCOME

*Wholehearted Living in a
Brokenhearted World*

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

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This book is dedicated to

KHENCHEN THRANGU RINPOCHE

*with love, devotion, and gratitude
for all his support and kindness
to me over many years.*

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Welcoming the Unwelcome

Begin with a Broken Heart

Our aim is to fully awaken our heart and mind, not just for our own greater well-being but also to bring benefit, solace, and wisdom to other living beings.

What motivation could top that?

WHEN YOU ENGAGE WITH SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS, it is wise to know your intentions. For example, you may ask yourself, “What is my purpose in reading this new book, with its ominous title *Welcoming the Unwelcome?*” Are you reading it because times are uncertain and you want some clues about what will help you make it through whatever’s coming? Are you reading it to gain wisdom about yourself? Do you hope it will help you get over certain emotional or mental patterns that undermine your well-being? Or did someone give it to you—with lots of enthusiasm—and now you don’t want to upset them by not reading it?

Your motivation may include some or all of the above. They are all good reasons (even the last one) for reading this or any book. But in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition to which I belong, when studying spiritual teachings, we set out

by arousing an even greater motivation, known as *bodhichitta*. In Sanskrit, *bodhi* means “awake” and *chitta* means “heart” or “mind.” Our aim is to fully awaken our heart and mind, not just for our own greater well-being but also to bring benefit, solace, and wisdom to other living beings. What motivation could top that?

The Buddha taught that all of us, at our essence, are good and loving. Because of this basic goodness, we naturally want to be there for others, especially those who are closest to us and those who are in the greatest need. We are keenly aware that others need us, and that our society and the planet as a whole need us, especially now. We want to do what we can to alleviate the fear, anger, and painful groundlessness that so many of us are experiencing these days. But what often happens when we try to help is that we find our own confusion and habitual tendencies getting in the way. I hear people talking like this: “I wanted to help at-risk teenagers, so I studied and trained, and I went into social work. Two days into the job, I found myself hating most of the kids! My initial feeling was ‘Why can’t we just get rid of all these kids and find some nicer ones who will cooperate with me?’ It was then that I realized I had to clean up my own act first.”

Bodhichitta, the awakened heart, begins with the wish to be free from whatever gets in the way of our helping others. We long to be free from the confused thoughts and habitual patterns that cover up our basic goodness, so that we can be less reactive, less fearful, and less stuck in our old ways. We understand that to whatever degree we can get beyond our neuroses and habits, we can be more available for those teenagers, for our family members, for our larger community, or for the strangers we meet. We may still be going through

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strong feelings and reactions on the inside, but if we know how to work with these emotions without falling into our usual ruts, then we can be right there for others. And even if there's nothing dramatic we can do to help, other people will feel our support, which actually helps a lot.

Bodhichitta begins with this aspiration, but it doesn't stop there. Bodhichitta is also a commitment. We commit to doing all it takes to free ourselves completely from all our varieties of confusion and unconscious habit and suffering, because these prevent us from being fully there for others. In the language of Buddhism, our ultimate commitment is to attain "enlightenment." In essence, this means knowing fully who we really are. When we are enlightened, we will be fully awake to our deepest nature, which is fundamentally open-hearted, open-minded, and available for others. We will know this to be true beyond any doubt, beyond any going back. In this state, we will possess the greatest possible wisdom and skill with which we can benefit others and help them to awaken completely themselves.

To fulfill the commitment of bodhichitta, we will need to learn everything there is to learn about our own heart and mind. This is a big job. It will most likely include reading books, listening to teachings, and deeply contemplating what we study. We will also learn a great deal about ourselves by having a regular practice of basic sitting meditation. In the back of the book I've included a simple meditation technique you can use anywhere. Finally, we will have to test and clarify our growing knowledge by applying it to our own lives, to the situations we naturally find ourselves in. When bodhichitta becomes the basis for how we live each day of our lives, then everything we do is meaningful. Our existence feels incredibly

rich. This is why it makes so much sense to bring to mind bodhichitta as often as possible.

Sometimes the wonderful motivation of bodhichitta arises easily. But when we're feeling anxious or self-concerned, when our confidence level is low, bodhichitta can seem beyond our reach. In such times, how can we uplift our hearts to generate the courageous longing to wake up for the benefit of others? How can we intentionally turn our mind around when it is feeling small?

My root teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught me a method for transforming the mind that I still follow. The first thing to do is to bring to mind a poignant image or story, something that naturally warms up your heart and puts you in touch with the human predicament. Maybe someone you really care about has recently been diagnosed with cancer or a degenerative disease. Or someone you care about with drug or alcohol problems, who has been doing well for a long time, has just relapsed. Or perhaps your dear friend has suffered a great loss. Maybe you saw something sad when you went to the grocery store, such as a painful interaction between a parent and a child. Or you think about the homeless woman you always see on the way to work. Or maybe you were affected by something you read in the news, such as a story about a famine or a family being deported.

Trungpa Rinpoche said that the way to arouse bodhichitta was to “begin with a broken heart.” Protecting ourselves from pain—our own and that of others—has never worked. Everybody wants to be free from their suffering, but the majority of us go about it in ways that only make things worse. Shielding ourselves from the vulnerability of all living beings—which includes our own vulnerability—cuts us off from the

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full experience of life. Our world shrinks. When our main goals are to gain comfort and avoid discomfort, we begin to feel disconnected from, and even threatened by, others. We enclose ourselves in a mesh of fear. And when many people and countries engage in this kind of approach, the result is a messy global situation with lots of pain and conflict.

Putting so much effort into protecting our hearts from pain hurts us over and over again. Even when we realize it's unhelpful, this is a hard habit to break. It's a natural human tendency. But when we generate bodhichitta, we go against the grain of this tendency. Instead of shying away, we arouse the bravery to take a direct look at ourselves and the world. Instead of being intimidated by phenomena, we come to embrace all aspects of our inexhaustibly rich lives.

We can touch in with bodhichitta by simply allowing ourselves to experience our own raw feelings, without getting sucked into our thoughts and stories about them. For instance, when I'm feeling lonely, I can blame myself, or I can fantasize about how nice it would be to have someone to spend time with. But I also have the opportunity to simply touch into that lonely feeling and discover bodhichitta is right there, in my own vulnerable heart. I can realize that my own loneliness is no different from the loneliness everyone else on this planet experiences. Similarly, my unwanted feelings about being left out or unjustly accused can connect me to all those who are similarly suffering.

When I'm embarrassed, when I feel like a loser, when I feel that something is fundamentally wrong with me, bodhichitta is present in those emotions. When I've made a big mistake, when I've failed to do what I set out to do, when I feel the sting of having let everyone down—at such times

I have the option to tap into the awakened heart of bodhi-chitta. If I really connect with my jealousy, my anger, or my prejudice, I find myself standing in the shoes of humanity. From this place, the longing to wake up to alleviate the suffering of the world comes naturally.

There is a long history of people successfully uncovering their basic goodness and basic bravery through dedicated practice. Some are famous religious figures, but most are not widely known, such as my friend Jarvis Masters, who has been in a California prison for more than thirty years. We won't always feel inspired to follow their examples and go fearlessly against the grain. Our confidence will ebb and flow. And the teachings never tell us to bite off more than we can chew. But if we gradually increase our capacity to be present with our pain and the sufferings of the world, we will surprise ourselves with our growing sense of courage.

In our practice of cultivating a broken heart, we can incrementally build the strength and skill to handle more and more. Trungpa Rinpoche, who had a huge capacity for being in the presence of suffering without turning away, would often bring to mind a time in Tibet when he was about eight years old. He was on the roof of a monastery and saw a group of young boys stoning a puppy to death. Though they were quite far away, he could see the terrified eyes of the dog and hear the boys' laughter. They were doing it just for fun. Rinpoche wished he could do something to save the puppy, but he was helpless. For the rest of his life, all he had to do was recall that time, and a strong desire to alleviate suffering would arise in his heart. The memory of the dog gave his desire to wake up a sense of urgency. This is what propelled him, day after day, to make the best use of his life.

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Most of us, one way or another, try to do good in the world. This is a natural result of our having basic goodness. But our positive motivations are often mixed with other factors. For example, some people try to be helpful because they feel bad about themselves. They hope to look good in the eyes of the world. Through their efforts, they hope to improve their standing with others, which may then raise their feeling of self-worth. Based on my long experience of living in communities, I can say that these people often accomplish an astonishing amount. You hear others saying, “Maria is worth six people,” or “I wish everyone was like Jordan.” In most ways, they’re the ones you want on your team. But at the same time, they don’t seem to get any closer to waking up. We all probably know someone who says things like, “I give and give and give and I never get thanked!” This kind of frustration is a sign that the underlying issues aren’t being worked out.

Some people work hard, day and night, in the field of helping others, but their strongest motivation is to stay busy so they can avoid feeling their own pain. Some are driven by an idea of being “good,” instilled in them by their family or culture. Some are motivated by feelings of obligation or guilt. Some do good to keep themselves out of trouble. Some are driven by the prospect of rewards, in this life or maybe in a future existence. Some are even motivated by resentment, anger, or a need to control.

If we take a good look within, we will probably discover that motivations like these are mixed with our genuine desire to help others. We shouldn’t beat ourselves up about this because all these motivations come from our natural human tendency to look for happiness and to protect ourselves from pain. But they do keep us from becoming more

connected with our own hearts and with the hearts of other people. This makes it difficult for us to benefit others in any deep way.

In contrast, the motivation of bodhichitta leads to more profound and long-lasting results because it's based on understanding where suffering comes from. At the outer level, there are the immense sufferings that we see and hear about and may experience from time to time—the cruelty, hunger, fear, abuse, and violence that plague people and animals and the planet itself. Every one of these comes from emotions such as greed and aggression, which in turn come from not understanding the basic goodness of our true nature. This ignorance is at the root of all our suffering. It lies beneath everything we do to harm ourselves and others. When we arouse bodhichitta, we commit to overcoming everything that obscures our innate wisdom and warm-heartedness, everything that cuts us off from our natural ability to empathize with and benefit others.

This awakening to our true nature doesn't happen overnight. And even as we begin to awaken and find ourselves more and more able to help others, we have to accept that there's not always something we can do—at least not immediately. Without making excuses or succumbing to indifference, we have to acknowledge that this is just how things are. Countless people and animals are suffering at this very moment, but how much can we do to prevent that? If we're on the roof of a monastery witnessing boys stone a puppy, maybe all we can do in the moment is to not turn away and to let the unfolding tragedy deepen our bodhichitta. Then we can let ourselves become curious about what causes people to hurt animals in the first place. Instead of seeing the boys'

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behavior as something alien to us, we can look for its roots within ourselves. Does the aggression or blindness that lies behind such actions dwell within our own heart? If we can find common ground in this way, then maybe the next time we encounter something similar, we'll be in a better position to communicate. And when we fully awaken to our true nature, we'll have a much greater ability to influence others. But even then, what we can do to help will be limited by circumstances.

So, when we arouse bodhichitta, it's important to understand that we're in it for the long haul. We will have to stick around for a long time and apply tremendous effort and patience. The supreme vision of bodhichitta is to help every single living being awaken to their true nature. Our only shot at accomplishing this is by first attaining enlightenment ourselves. Along the way, we can take one step at a time, doing our best to keep our longing and commitment going during the ups and downs of our lives.

As you read this book, please try to keep in mind the larger context of bodhichitta. This will be a lot more fruitful than reading it for intellectual stimulation. If you begin with a broken heart, a heart that longs to help others, then you may find a few things here to take away with you. Of all the words in this book, there might be one paragraph or one sentence—maybe one I didn't even realize was that important—that clicks for you in just the right way. Something may change the way you see things and actually move you closer to being able to alleviate suffering in the world.

These teachings are not just my own ideas. They are my attempt to communicate the wisdom I have received from my teachers, who received it from their teachers and so on,

W E L C O M I N G T H E U N W E L C O M E

in a line of sages stretching back thousands of years. If you come to them with the motivation of bodhichitta, there is no limit to the benefit they can bring. When we're really in touch with the longing to help others, and when our lives are committed to that purpose, we can consider ourselves among the most fortunate people on this earth.

Does It Matter?

*When we start to ask ourselves, "Does it matter?"
we realize how many aspects there are to every situation.
We begin to appreciate how interconnected we are to the
rest of the world, and how even our thought patterns
can lead to a whole series of consequences.*

SOMETIMES WE CATCH OURSELVES ABOUT TO DO something that doesn't quite feel right. We're about to react habitually and we feel a tinge of misgiving or queasiness. At such times, we may avoid a lot of trouble by asking ourselves a simple question: Does it matter?

For instance, when I'm about to send a harsh or slanderous email, does it matter? Does it matter to me? Does it matter to others? When I'm about to take something that's not offered, does it matter? Does it make any difference even if no one finds out? When I eat the last piece, or throw the can out the window, or glare at someone, does it matter? What are the consequences of my behavior? Am I causing harm to myself or others? If I go off on someone, does it matter? If I then feel justified in doing so, does it matter? Does it matter if I