

LETTING GO OF
FEAR AND TREMBLING TAKES
courage

by Pema Chödrön



Pema Chödrön: "LSD... fried their brains."

As Albert Einstein pointed out, the tragedy of experiencing ourselves as apart from everyone else is that this delusion becomes a prison. Sadder yet, we become increasingly unnerved at the possibility of freedom. When the barriers come down, we don't know what to do. We need a bit more warning about what it feels like when the walls start tumbling down. We need to be told that fear and trembling accompany growing up, and that letting go takes courage. Finding the courage to go to the places that scare

us cannot happen without compassionate inquiry into the workings of ego. So we ask ourselves, "What do I do when I feel I can't handle what's going on? Where do I look for strength and in what do I place my trust?"

The Buddha taught that flexibility and openness bring strength and that running from groundlessness weakens us and brings pain. But do we understand that becoming familiar with the running away is the key? Openness doesn't come from resisting our fears but from getting to know them well.

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Rather than going after those walls and barriers with a sledgehammer, we pay attention to them. With gentleness and honesty, we move closer to those walls. We touch them and smell them and get to know them well. We begin a process of acknowledging our aversions and our cravings. We become familiar with the strategies and beliefs we use to build the walls: What are the stories I tell myself? What repels me and what attracts me? We start to get curious about what's going on. Without calling what we see right or wrong, we simply look as objectively as we can. We can observe ourselves with humor, not getting overly serious, moralistic, or uptight about this investigation. Year after year, we train in remaining open and receptive to whatever arises. Slowly, very slowly, the cracks in the walls seem to widen and, as if by magic, bodhichitta is able to flow freely.

A teaching that supports us in this process of unblocking bodhichitta is that of **the three lords of materialism**. These are the three ways that we shield ourselves from this fluid, un-pin-downable world, three strategies we use to provide ourselves with the illusion of security. This teaching encourages us to become very familiar with these strategies of ego, to see clearly how we continue to seek comfort and ease in ways that only strengthen our fears.

The first of the three lords of materialism is called the lord of form.

It represents how we look to externals to give us solid ground. We can begin to pay attention to our methods of escape. What do I do when I feel anxious and depressed, bored or lonely? Is "shopping therapy" my way of coping? Or do I turn to alcohol or food? Do I cheer myself up with drugs or sex, or do I seek adventure? Do I prefer retreating into the beauty of nature or into the delicious world provided by a really good book? Do I fill up the space by making phone calls, by surfing the net, by watching hours of TV? Some of these methods are dangerous, some are humorous, some are

quite benign. The point is that we can misuse any substance or activity to run away from insecurity. When we become addicted to the lord of form, we are creating the causes and conditions for suffering to escalate ...

The second of the three lords of materialism is the lord of speech.

This lord represents how we use beliefs of all kinds to give us the illusion of certainty about the nature of reality. Any of the "isms" – political, ecological, philosophical, or spiritual – can be misused in this way. "Political correctness" is a good example of how this lord operates. When we believe in the correctness of our view, we can be very narrow-minded and prejudiced about the faults of other people.

For example, how do I react when my beliefs about the government are challenged? How about when others don't agree with how I feel about homosexuality or women's rights or the environment? What happens when my ideas about smoking or drinking are challenged? What do I do when my religious convictions are not shared?

New practitioners often embrace meditation or the Buddhist teachings with passionate enthusiasm. We feel part of a new group, glad to have a new perspective. But do we then judge people who see the world differently? Do we close our minds to others because they don't believe in karma?

The problem isn't with the beliefs themselves but with how we use them to get ground under our feet, how we use them to feel right and to make someone else wrong, how we use them to avoid feeling the uneasiness of not knowing what is going on ...

The third lord, the lord of mind, uses the most subtle and seductive strategy of all.

The lord of mind comes into play when we attempt to avoid uneasiness by seeking special states of mind. We can use drugs this way. We can use sports. We can use falling in love. We can use spiritual practices. There are many ways to obtain altered states of mind. These special states are addictive. It feels so good to break free

from our mundane experience. We want more. For example, new meditators often expect that with training they can transcend the pain of ordinary life. It's disappointing, to say the least, to be told to touch down into the thick of things, to remain open and receptive to boredom as well as bliss.

Sometimes, out of the blue, people have amazing experiences. Recently a lawyer told me that while standing on a street corner waiting for the light to change an extraordinary thing occurred. Suddenly her body expanded until it felt as big as the entire uni-

hinder us. We can trust our experiences as valid, but then we have to move on and learn to get along with our neighbors. Then even the most remarkable insights can begin to permeate our lives. As the twelfth-century Tibetan yogi Milarepa said when he heard of his student Gampopa's peak experiences, "They are neither good nor bad. Keep meditating." It isn't the special states themselves that are the problem, it's their addictive quality. Since it is inevitable that what goes up must come down, when we take refuge in the lord of mind we are doomed to disappointment.

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verse. She felt instinctively that she and the universe were one. She had no doubt that this was actually true. She knew she was not, as she'd previously assumed, separate from everything else.

Needless to say, the experience shook up her beliefs and made her question what we do with our lives, spending so much time trying to protect the illusion of our personal territory. She understood how this predicament leads to the wars and violence that are escalating all over the globe. The problem arose when she started hanging on to her experience, when she wanted it back. Ordinary perception was no longer satisfying: it left her feeling troubled and out of touch. She felt that if she couldn't stay in that altered state she'd just as soon be dead.

In the sixties I knew people who took LSD every day with the belief that they could maintain that high. Instead they fried their brains. I still know men and women who are addicted to falling in love. Like Don Juan, they can't bear it when that initial glow begins to wear off; they're always seeking out someone new.

Even though peak experiences might show us the truth and inform us about why we are training, they are essentially no big deal. If we can't integrate them into the ups and downs of our lives, if we cling to them, they will

Each of us has a variety of habitual tactics for avoiding life as it is. In a nutshell, that's the message of the three lords of materialism. This simple teaching is, it seems, everyone's autobiography. When we use these strategies, we become less able to enjoy the tenderness and wonder that is available in the most unremarkable of times.

Connecting with bodhichitta is ordinary. When we don't run from everyday uncertainty, we can contact bodhichitta. It's a natural force that wants to emerge. It is, in fact, unstoppable. Once we stop blocking it with ego's strategies, the refreshing water of bodhichitta will definitely begin to flow. We can slow it down. We can dam it up. Nevertheless, whenever there's an opening, bodhichitta will always appear, like those weeds and flowers that pop out of the sidewalk as soon as there's a crack. ☉

From The Places that Scare You by Pema Chödrön © 2001. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc. www.shambhala.com. Pema Chodron's other best-selling books include When Things Fall Apart, The Wisdom of No Escape, Start Where You Are and most recently No Time To Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva reviewed in Mandala December 2005/January 2006.