

# A Bridge Between East and West— An Interview with Tsultrim Allione

Interview by Jacqueline Kramer

I first met Tsultrim Allione at Spirit Rock on a one-day retreat. Having read her book *Women of Wisdom* in the 1980s, I was looking forward to meditating with her—and was not disappointed. Sitting with her feminine, powerful presence greatly enhanced the experience of vastness in my meditation. A pioneer who helped bring Buddhism to the West, Tsultrim is the co-founder, spiritual director, and resident teacher of Tara Mandala in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, and was the first American woman to be ordained as a Tibetan nun in 1970. She has fashioned the Chöd teachings for Western sensibilities and writes about it in her book *Feeding The Demons—Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict*. The Chöd teachings were developed by an eleventh century Yogini named Machig Labdrön, of whom Tsultrim Allione has been recognized as an emanation. We talked over the phone while she was in India. Even through the blurred phone reception, her words were clear and powerful.

**JK:** How was it for you, in the beginning, as a young woman with a deep spiritual quest? Did you feel supported? Did it feel natural to pursue it? Was there resistance?

**TA:** My path began when I was nineteen. My personal path was also a process of individuating from my parents. I had really wonderful parents so I wasn't trying to get away from them or hurt them, at the same time they had a path in mind for me that was different than the one that started to emerge in my life. In retrospect it all makes sense but at the time, as a nineteen-year-old, it was very difficult to even understand what I was longing for. There was something I was longing for that I wasn't finding in college and that I wasn't going to find in a career. I think the late teens and early twenties is such an important moment in a young person's life. It's really not talked about that much, that time of individuation and moving out of the home.

So, I went to India. I was living in the United States Consul General's mansion in Calcutta. We went everywhere in a huge American car, with the American flag blowing, and a uniformed chauffeur. We were taken to Mother Teresa's home for unwed mothers and unwanted babies in Calcutta to do volunteer work in this car. I was uncomfortable in this situation and felt I wasn't really in India. So I left and hitchhiked across India with a Japa-

nese friend of mine. We hitchhiked and took third class trains without a ticket from Calcutta to Dharamsala. It was actually shocking and an amazingly beautiful experience. We would ride up on the top of trucks which had a little box over the cab for extra storage space. We sat in this sort of balcony from where we could see India pass by. It was fall so not too hot and not too cold. The crucial part of this journey was, I was going towards something unknown that was calling me, drawing me forward but I had no words for it. I had been part of the sixties-era experiments with psychedelics and drugs that expand the mind or alter consciousness and even before that was interested in Tibet and India and their spiritual traditions.



Tsultrim Allione

I was interested, like a lot of people of our generation, in alternate realities but had no idea about Buddhism or what a path would be, or discipline. So we hitchhiked across India and landed in Dharamsala in November of 1967 where I met many Tibetan refugees. They had been out of Tibet less than 10 years and were living very primitively in flat-

tened tin can houses. As soon as I met them, I had a feeling of recognition—a deep, deep longing inside of me, as if I had been homesick all my life for something that I didn't realize I had been homesick for.

There were very few books on Buddhism at that time. And there weren't very many there in Dharamsala. There was a little pamphlet on "What is a Buddhist?" given away in Dharamsala. I read that and it was talking about the Four Noble Truths, like all conditioned existence is suffering and I thought, how depressing Buddhism is. I actually wasn't attracted to Buddhism when I first read about it. I wasn't attracted to an approach to life in which everything is suffering. I didn't feel that way about life.

I didn't understand the deeper aspects of what the Buddha meant by suffering. However, I was very attracted to the Tibetan people. That was really my avenue, I'm sure it was from a past life. I had an inner longing and at the same time I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do and there was no cultural context for me to pursue it. I did anyway. After six months in Asia, I went back to the US, to college, for a while, but felt that what I was looking for was not here. I tried to organize a meditation group at my college. Me and a few other people would get together and meditate. We didn't know how to meditate. We would just sit. Then I returned to India, overland from London to Kathmandu through Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and I met His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa when I arrived in Kathmandu. That was the turning point when I developed the idea to become a nun.

**JK: Had you seen any nuns at that point?**

**TA:** I must have seen some nuns, but I don't have a clear memory of seeing nuns. Tibetan nuns were around, but there were more monks. I hadn't even taken the refuges before ordination. Afterward I had to figure out what vows I was taking. I was given the Getsulma ordination with thirty-six vows.

It's the highest ordination given to women in the Tibetan organization.

**JK: How long were you a celibate monastic?**

**TA:** Almost four years.

**JK: Were you in India the whole time?**

**TA:** I was in India most of the time and back in the United States for a year. I gave my vows back when I was in the U.S. Once I was ordained, I realized that there was only one

Tibetan nunnery. It was on the way to Dharamsala and overseen by the Karmapa. Have you heard of the woman Freda Bedi? She was a very interesting woman. She was English and married to an Indian man, Father Bedi, a very spiritual man who was very close to Gandhi. She was called "Mummy" by the lamas



Retreat at Tara Mandala

because she started a school for young Tibetan reincarnated lamas or tulkus. She educated them in English and she was the one who sent Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche to the West. She was very important actually. Her nun's name was Khechog Palmo. She mentored me a little bit, but I was very independent. There was only her and I in the Karma Kagyu tradition. Tenzin Palmo, Ani Jinba Palmo, and Lodro Palmo were Western, but they were Drukpa Kagyu. It was way before Pema Chodron took ordination. I wasn't called to be in the nunnery where there were no teachings and where the nuns were just doing pujas. So I went up into the mountains on retreat. I found my teacher, Apho Rinpoche. He was a married yogi who had four children.

**JK: Is celibacy a choice a monk can make in your tradition?**



**TA:** If you're a monk, you're celibate. But you can be a yogi. There's another path called the white Sangha, the Ngagpa or Mantrika. This (refers to) people (who) can be married but are also full time practitioners. But if you are a monastic, you're celibate.

**JK:** **It's nice that there's a range there.**

**TA:** Yes, that you're not just a layperson or a monastic, but there's another option. So I lived as a nun. I never lived in a nunnery. I lived in retreat or was on pilgrimage. I studied in Nepal with Sapchu Rinpoche and Darjeeling with Kalu Rinpoche. I went back to learn from the Karmapa. I lived in Bodhgaya. During this time, I was learning to read and speak Tibetan and doing my meditation practice.

**JK:** **Did you have your child in the United States?**

**TA:** Yes. I got pregnant in India. My husband was Dutch so we went to Holland for a while. Then we moved to Vashon-Maury Island, an island close to Seattle. I had her, a home delivery, on that island. I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. I actually had postpartum depression. It wasn't talked about at that time. I had a feeling of, "what did I do. I gave away all of my freedom. I can't practice because here I am with a baby day and night." Sherab, my daughter, was colicky and very active. It was a big change for me, a shock. I had been told when I was pregnant if I had a boy, it meant it was okay I'd disrobed, but a girl meant I had really fallen from grace. Trungpa Rinpoche helped me a lot with this. He said we should celebrate my new life and asked me to start teaching. I began teaching under his guidance and studying in the Seattle area with a great lama, Deshing Rinpoche, who lived in Seattle, and had my second daughter,

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**JK:** **What an amazing adventure for a young woman to be on.**

**TA:** Yes. I was ordained when I was 22. It was very good to be experiencing a "virgin existence" in the sense of belonging to no man, to be an independent woman, to not be caught up in whatever was happening with my latest boyfriend. That's the age when you're exploring relationships. I cut myself out of that for those four years. I found a lot of strength in myself. I was actually very happy. I was joyful. I loved my teachers. I loved the lifestyle and I felt supported in India. I never felt from any of my teachers at that time that there was a problem with me being a woman. I didn't feel I couldn't do certain things because I was a woman. Probably if I had kept going, I was doing pretty preliminary practices at the time, it might have been a problem. I don't know if I would have been blocked from further practices if I had gone on, but I don't think so. I didn't feel blocked or terminated as a woman, and I didn't really want more.

I didn't want to become a fully ordained bhikkhuni although the Karmapa wanted me to. I didn't really want more vows. I'm not the nun type. It isn't something I've always wanted to do. At the same time, the amount that I did do was a really good thing for me. I got a lot of inner strength from it. The reason I disrobed is that I went back to America and went into Trungpa Rinpoche's sangha, which was pretty wild. It was not exactly a monastic environment. I was young, in my twenties. I wanted to be a part of all of that and, of course, there was my sexuality bubbling up. And, I had no support whatsoever as a nun when I went back. There were no other nuns, not Tibetan, not Western, not Theravadin—nobody but me. Disrobing was a very agonizing decision. But I also started dreaming about babies. I went back to India and returned my vows. Very shortly after that I got pregnant with my first child.

Aloka. After a while, we moved to Boulder, Colorado and I started teaching at Naropa University, which was just starting then. Trungpa Rinpoche was really teaching people how to be in the world. His students were very serious practitioners. Their practice was the primary focus in their lives. It wasn't like today where people do the dharma as an addition to their life. It was more like, "What do I have to do so that I can practice?" That was good for me in the sense that I was a really serious practitioner.

**JK:** **How was it for you to be a mother and a serious practitioner?**

**TA:** It wasn't easy. I don't think you've ever talked to a mother who would say that's easy. Being a mother is so full time. I had my second child seventeen months after the first. Within two years, I had two children. I was meditating with my kids crawling all over me. After many years, I took day or two retreats away and tried to have a daily practice. But it was difficult when they were little because they would wake up so early and by the time they went to bed at night, I was exhausted. It was difficult. I tried to make my practice—life as practice—but at the same time I had such a longing for deep practice. It's different to think, I'm going to be mindful while I'm changing the diaper, than engaging in deep meditation practice. I did have a longing for the deep practice so it was a conflict and there was nothing I could do. It's just wasn't realistic. But eventually my children got older and I could do more short retreats and try to bring them into the practice.

**JK:** **How did you do that?**

**TA:** One of the games I played with them was making altars. We would meditate in front of the altar. I took them to Nepal and they learned about practices like making offerings.

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**JK:** That sort of thing goes deep into the bones. My daughter had contact with the Sri Lankan monks when she was young. She remembers them fondly to this day.

**TA:** Yes. To me it's the presence of the people. It's not what you say. It's who you are and what you do.

There were no family retreats at that time or family programs. There was just childcare, which wasn't so great for the children. My two older children ended up feeling like Buddhism was something I left them to do. Now there have been efforts to include children in the practice. At Tara Mandala, we help families develop family practice. I've thought about it a lot because it was something that was so challenging for me. I think there are a lot of men and women who want to have a family and who are serious practitioners. They want their kids to have a positive experience of the dharma.

**JK:** It seems to take a community infra-structure to support that sort of activity. It sounds like you're building some of that at Tara Mandala.

**TA:** Yes, we are. It's been going for over twenty years. We now have kids who've grown up, kids who have come to family retreats since they were one or two years old and are now in college or post college.

**JK:** Do you have monastics?

**TA:** The monastics are an essential part of planting Buddhism in new soil and wherever Buddhism has taken hold, it has built up its ordained Sangha.

**JK:** Yes, it's interesting how the Tibetan lineage has layers of monasticism, how it offers different levels of

practice, from monk or nun to a full time lay practitioner. It sounds like there is a lot of respect for the different layers.

**TA:** Yes, the Tibetans, at least the older generations, are deeply spiritual people. They practice quite a bit. That was what attracted me to Buddhism in the first place, the joy of the Tibetan refugees I met. Some of them saw their whole family shot and still they radiated joy. How was that possible? It was because of their understanding of karma and their faith in Buddha-Dharma.

**JK:** What do you think it is that created the capacity for that level of equanimity?

**TA:** I think the profound practice, the level of realization of their own lamas, is a big part of it. The commitment to reach realization in one lifetime and the practice that comes with that gives everyone such a profound inspiration.

**JK:** Is there anything about your practice you'd like to share with our readers?

**TA:** One of the things that people of my generation have sat with is being a bridge between Asia and the West. We've been looking at how to make these profound teachings that have evolved in Asia practical and applicable for people in the West. My focus in this life has been the Chöd practice and the work of Machig Labdron. I evolved the demon work, feeding the demons from that, as a way to help people work with their own demons. It came out of my understanding of how Mara tried to stop the Buddha from becoming enlightened. It's not something from the outside. We all have our Maras—fears, jealousy, illnesses, poisonous emotions, or eating disorders. We all have demons. The demon work is about feeding that side of you, the shadow part of the psyche, and inviting it to come out, then feeding it. That's a huge paradigm shift for our culture. We fight against our demons, we try to get rid of our demons, before we actually find out what our demons need. There is always an emotional need behind our demons. When you find the need, the demon energy can relax. If you don't do that, if you fight against your demons, they actually get stronger and stronger. All these aspects are like our children. They just want attention. When we accept them and acknowledge them, that energy can become integrated. The energy becomes accessible. It becomes an ally.

**JK:** We really need that sort of work in our culture. I hope it expands into many areas that need healing. Thank you so much for sharing your life and insights with us.

**TA:** My pleasure.



*Jacqueline Kramer, author of Buddha Mom and director of Hearth Foundation, has been studying and practicing the dharma for over thirty years.*