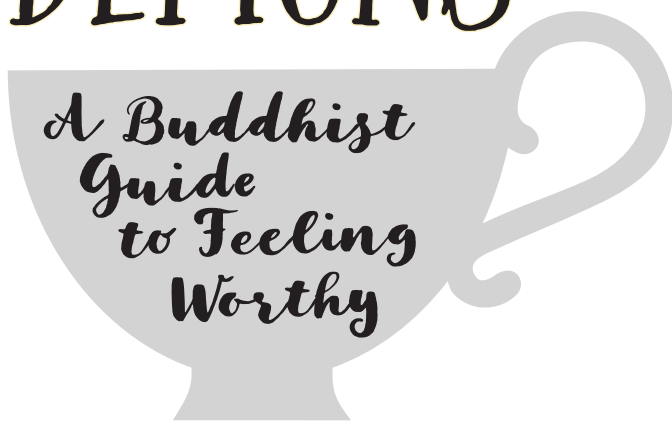


TEA  
AND  
CAKE  
WITH  
DEMONS



**ADREANNA LIMBACH**

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# Introduction

There is a widely circulated Buddhist story about the time that a demon came to town and everyone lost their minds. This wasn't any garden-variety demon, mind you, and yes, there are garden-variety demons. A touch of awkwardness, restlessness, longing—anything that nibbles at our peace of mind can be considered a demon; albeit some are harmless and benign. These are the basic sorts of demons that we meet any old Monday afternoon when we're pinged with the impulse to be somewhere else or somebody else or to just go grab a snack out of boredom. This particular demon story, however, is about Mara, who in Buddhist cosmology is the most malignant demon of all. You might recognize Mara if you saw him, but if he's a pervasive force in your life, then in the same way that we can develop an acclimated blindness to what is overly familiar, you might not see him at all. Mara is the specter of delusion whom we chauffeur through our life; the interior voice that robs us of our faith, trust, and confidence, of our belief that we are fundamentally whole. In Buddhist mythology, Mara is self-doubt personified; a force that's depicted as convincing, relentless, and strategic, and in this story he's coming for the Buddha.

Buddha's attendants caught wind that Mara had materialized, and they went running to alert Buddha that his nemesis was near. In my own paraphrased version, I imagine a cohort of visibly shaken monks clad in saffron robes banging on the

Buddha's door. "Buddha! Buddha! Mara is here! Mara is here!" When the Buddha opened the door to his distressed attendants, they understandably launched into strategy. "What should we do? Should we run? Let's pack up our begging bowls and get out of town. We have enough advance warning that we can probably outrun him!" Another monk chimed in, "We'll never be able to run fast enough. Let's hide! I know of a place that is secure and hidden. Mara will never find us there. Quick!" Yet another chimed in, "Maybe we should plan an ambush! Let's arm ourselves with shields and spears and face Mara on the offensive!"

This part of the story I relate to deeply. It's as though these monks are diplomats of my own mind. More than a decade of meditation practice has afforded me many hours of watching my relationship to discomfort. The moment I feel it, I'm on the express track to strategizing my way out of it. This reaction applies to even the most mundane experiences. The absence of air-conditioning in August. An awkward conversation. A mosquito in my vicinity. Never mind how I might react if Mara, the Lord of Delusion, rolled into town with my name in his mouth. Just like the monks, without skipping a beat, my mind launches into *How do I fix this right now?* I don't want to spend time with my discomfort. I certainly don't want to feel it. I just want it to be different. Better . . . with the least amount of effort, if possible.

There is something universal being spoken to in this story of Mara, which is, of course, the enduring beauty of mythology. Each of these monks represents our habitual ways of reacting when we come into contact with our demons. We want to run from them, or hide, or fight. What the Buddha does instead is so counterintuitive that it offers us a wholly alternative plan of action for when we encounter our demons.

In the presence of his attendants trying to strategize the problem of Mara away, he holds his seat and gives simple instructions: “Go fetch Mara and escort him to my door. Set the table with my finest china. And invite him in for tea, not as my enemy, but as my esteemed guest.”

My guess is that you have plenty of experience with your own demons, and that you have a number of strategies that you keep by your proverbial nightstand for dealing with them. I say this because if you are human, there’s a good chance that you’ve had your heart broken or, at the very least, have been deeply disappointed by something that didn’t turn out the way that you had hoped. There is the classic heartbreak of lost romance or unrequited love. There is the deep disappointment of not living up to our own expectations, perhaps failing to fulfill the promises we made to ourselves about what we needed to succeed or survive—promises we probably made when we were much younger. There is the mundane dissatisfaction of feeling restless or out of place. The impulse to find comfort by moving our leg half an inch. The itch we can’t quite scratch. The wish to be elsewhere and the certainty that if we just had a different \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank), our happiness would click into place. There is the paycheck that never quite stretches far enough; the pain of not being accepted, sometimes by others, sometimes by ourselves; and the ceaseless striving to make something just so. There is the exhaustion, and the stress. There are the nights spent not sleeping or the days spent working too hard. There is the divorce. The death. The diagnosis. There are the societal concerns and injustices, oppression and disillusionment. There are all the ways we will not be able to shield our children from the pains of growing up, or shield ourselves from the pains of growing old. This list is incomplete, and of course it’s just a skimming of the surface,

but I'm sure that you get my point. Our demons thrive here in hardship and heartbreak, injustice and uncertainty. Because we face our demons so often, it's useful to understand how to relate to them in a way that doesn't perpetuate our unhappiness or stir up a sludgy shame spiral that pits us against ourselves and our experience. This is, in part, where this book comes in.

It's worth noting that in stories in which the Buddha is face-to-face with his own demons, namely Mara the Lord of Delusion, they aren't showcased as his enemies, but rather as his venerated nemeses. This nuance tells us something about what our demons are, or what they have the potential to become. Enemies are interchangeable. They are forces who may be hostile to you or that you just plain don't like. But a nemesis holds an enduring post that makes you wonder if the protagonist—that is, you—could exist without them. Take Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, for example, or the Jedi and the Sith. Each protagonist-antagonist coupling is a single essence halved right down the center to form two contrasting parts. The thin line that divides them makes them antithetical, like synchronized swimmers in opposition. A hero only knows herself as a hero if there is also a villain in the plot. The sun only knows itself as the daylight because of dusk and the rise of the moon.

The same can be said for the Buddha, who represents our capacity to tap into the wakeful, luminous, clear, and present nature that is always available to us. Through meditation practice we can come to know ourselves to be fundamentally whole and the antithesis to Mara, who represents our confusion and self-doubt. The key to the story of the Buddha inviting Mara in for tea is that every step we take toward revealing the ground of our worthiness will unearth all of the demon material that conceals it; wisdom and confusion ride side by side. This isn't a

problem. This is clarity. One begets the other. The way that we continue to embody our worth is to understand the paradox of our shadowy bits and to welcome our own confusion when it arises. The practice is in the invitation. We receive our demons and embrace them at the door, knowing we are whole enough to include it all.

This book explores self-worth and all that obscures it through the lens of the traditional Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths. One of the most common struggles that I've both personally experienced and encountered in others in my work is the pervasive feeling of a fundamental flaw, the sense of not being "good enough." We are reminded repeatedly in myriad ways that we need to be smarter, thinner, more attractive, better educated, employed at a higher level, coupled, and then married with great sex and good skin. Forever. Then, and only then, will we access the happiness granted to those who continue to strive. Yet after years of chasing those external goals, a number of us end up disillusioned; boxes are checked, but we're no closer to fulfillment. Or perhaps we simply feel bad about ourselves, as if everyone else has figured it out and gotten their act together but us. It's of very little surprise that we come to doubt our fundamental worth or that we believe we are destined to be chronically two steps behind.

That's where the Buddha's teachings can be exceedingly valuable. There is no dogmatic "do this and you'll be happy forevermore" sort of nonsense in them, but rather they offer a sustainable path of inquiry with which we can make friends with ourselves, regardless of our circumstances, expectations, or achievements. The Four Noble Truths, in particular, are both practical and experiential teachings designed to help us realize that we are okay, complete, and worthy as we are, in a way that can never be diminished. In this book we'll walk through the



foundational teachings the Buddha offered through the lens of this realization, while engaging in practices along the way that will help you discover this simple truth for yourself. Each chapter will offer a perspective, a lens through which we can view our self-worth and the demon material that tends to obscure it, as well as a number of “On the Spot Practices” that act as simple checkpoints for us to integrate these teachings into our lives in a moment-to-moment way.

# PART 1

## *Waking Up to Worthiness*

How do you measure your worth as a person? Is it through the eyes of others? Through accomplishments and successes? Behavior and contributions? Perhaps you recognize worth as an intangible force that all other success is built upon. When we have it, self-worth can act as a steady base that grounds us confidently in the world. We feel more able to take up space, to share our voice, to be generous without expectation. When we don't have self-worth we spend vast amounts of unconscious effort hustling to secure it. In the first part of this book, we begin by exploring the theory that perhaps our worth, our value, is an inborn state that we all possess—not contingent on external factors. We then take some time to explore the many forces that obscure our worth, by learning to make friends with our own minds. We begin to explore the path of self-worth as a process of continually coming back to ourselves, over and over again, and by taking time to understand who and what we are at a fundamental level.

## Acorns Know How to Oak

Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.

John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*

Of all of Aristotle's many landmark contributions to Western society, one of the most touching might be the strange Ancient Greek word *entelékheia*. Modernized over time as *entelechy*, it's the combination of the Greek words *ékhō*, which means "to have," and *télos*, which means "wholeness, completion, or fruition." Spun together, entelechy represents that which has wholeness, that which contains its own completion. It's a form of intelligence considered to be constitutional to all life on Earth, the instinct to develop into our fullest expression of ourselves. Acorns know how to "oak" into mighty eight-story trees. Spiders know how to "silk" and spin webs that by weight are stronger than steel. Caterpillars know how to dissolve into liquid and rebuild their bodies with wings.

My husband and I sometimes marvel at what a dog our dog is. He is the essence of dogness in his very being in a way that is so undeniable and complete. Everything he does is an expression

of “dogging,” as though his very nature is a verb. It’s a delight to watch him instinctively dog, and it’s simultaneously unremarkable because there is nothing unique about it. Entelechy asserts that there is an intelligence at play in the natural world that often goes uncredited. It is so benign and overt that it’s easy to take it for granted. There is this commonplace miracle of life unfolding everywhere that life exists. The miracle is that all things know how to become; we contain our own completeness as well as pure potential.

One of the fundamental teachings in the Mahayana schools of Buddhism is that of Buddha Nature. Depending on the teaching, it is sometimes referred to as basic goodness, luminosity of mind, or *tathāgatagarbha*, which is the Sanskrit word for Buddha-Essence or Buddha-Embryo and the name of the sutra that the teaching of Buddha Nature springs from. This essence is akin to the entelechy of basic wholeness, completeness, and worth that we all possess. Just by virtue of being human. While Buddha Nature may sound lovely and true to some of us, I realize that for others it may be a hard pill to swallow. Much like the nemesis principle discussed in the introduction, opposing forces develop when we recognize contrast. The moment that we cast a light on our inherent worth, its shadow stands out in sharp relief. How can we talk about the basic goodness of humanity when there is evidence to the contrary everywhere? Bombs are being dropped and people are sleeping in boxes and there seems to be a new humanitarian crisis each week, not to mention the tiny infringements on human dignity that we both suffer and inflict regularly. If you doubt that you undermine human dignity on a regular basis, check the number of times a day that you scroll through your smartphone rather than connecting to the person in front of you. It’s a tiny but pervasive example that no one I know is exempt from. From

the perspective of Buddha Nature, these small infringements, along with the larger ones such as ignorance, hate, and greed, are obscurations: neurotic manifestations of the mind that spring from the tenderest parts of ourselves. The allegory of inviting our demons to tea suggests that we don't ignore this side of our humanity, rather we learn how to work with it. The entirety of the path that we're on leads us back to our inherent wholeness, which is inclusive of our contrast. Human dignity and its infringements. Our wholeness includes it all.

The principles of basic goodness remind us that we have a birthright of belonging—to the earth and the earth to us. If a dog is inherently dogging at all times, so do we humans keep returning to our humanity and the clear, luminous, awake, and whole embryo of Buddha Nature that we all possess. Our bodies regularly testify to this inheritance of belonging. There is calcium in our teeth, in the seashells of the ocean, in the sedimentary cliffs of Iran and Utah, and in the bones that hold us upright. The intelligence of design to which we belong ensures that absolutely nothing dies without being carefully wrapped in earth, to be deconstructed and cleaned and used to feed life again. Nothing is wasted, nothing is discarded, everything is workable and has a place.

When left to its own devices, life is in service to life in an endless playback loop that ensures that life will persist. A cut will instinctively heal itself and our lungs know how to breathe, without ever being asked, and without us needing to know “how.” Right now, there are weeds asserting their place in this legacy by pushing their lives up through cracks in the pavement. Even in the nuclear wasteland that is Chernobyl, which people abandoned in the mid-1980s, wild-life populations are flourishing because nature is tenacious and resilient and finds a way even in toxic environments. This wisdom of nature is reflective of our constitution: what we are