



Machik Labdrön (1031-1129)

The consort of Padampa Sangye and principal holder of his *Chö* lineage. She holds the large double drum used in this practice to summon all the guests to the symbolic feast.

CHAPTER FIVE

The kusali's accumulation: destroying the four demons at a single stroke*

Now comes a brief offering of one's own body called the *kusali's* accumulation. Since this practice is linked to the Guru Yoga in *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*, it is permissible to combine it with the Guru Yoga. Alternatively, and without any contradiction, it can also be practised as part of the accumulation of merit along with the mandala offering. That is how it will be explained here, in accordance with an oral tradition that teaches it in that way.

I. THE BODY AS AN OFFERING

The word "kusali" means a beggar. To accumulate merit and wisdom, yogis who have renounced ordinary life—hermits who live in the mountains, for instance—use visualization to make offerings of their own bodies, having no other possessions to offer.

* The name of the practice discussed here is *gcod*, pronounced "Chö." Its basic meaning is "to cut." In this chapter it is used constantly with the various meanings of destroy, cut, eradicate, cut through concepts. We have translated it in its verbal form in various ways according to the context. When it appears as the name of the practice, we have left it untranslated. The reader should appreciate the range of meaning implied.

All the other material things that we gather around us with so much effort and concern are for the care of our bodies, and compared to any other possession it is without doubt our bodies that we cherish most. To sever our infatuation with our own bodies and use them as an offering* is therefore far more beneficial than offering any other possession. It is said:

Offering your horse or bull is worth hundreds of other offerings;
Offering your child or spouse is worth thousands;
Offering your own body is worth hundreds of thousands.

Machik Labdrön says:

Not knowing that to give away my body without attachment
Was to accumulate merit and wisdom,
I have clung to this dear body of mine.²⁰³
This I confess to the nirmanakaya of the Mother.²⁰⁴

II. THE PRACTICE OF OFFERING THE BODY

First, if you are used to the visualization you may choose to shoot your consciousness directly into space and visualize it there instantaneously as the Wrathful Black True Mother.²⁰⁵ If you are not, imagine in your heart the essence of your mental consciousness in the form of the Wrathful Mother. She is dancing and swaying, brandishing a curved knife high in the air with her right hand, and with her left holding a skull-cup full of blood at her heart. The squealing head of a black sow protrudes from behind her right ear. She is wearing the apparel of a wrathful goddess.

As you pronounce the syllable "P'et!"²⁰⁶ the Wrathful Mother flies up through your central channel. At the exact instant that she shoots up out of the aperture of Brahma on the top of your head, your body becomes a corpse and collapses in a heap. Here, do not think of your body as having its normal appearance. Instead, see it as fat, greasy and huge, as big as the entire cosmos of a billion worlds.

With a single blow of the curved knife in her right hand, the Wrathful Black Mother—the visualized form of your consciousness—slices off the top of the inanimate body's skull at the level of the eyebrows to make a skull cup. Again, meditate that the skull cup is not life-size, but as big as the entire cosmos of a billion worlds. With her left hand the Wrathful Mother picks up the skull cup and places it, with the brow facing her, on

* This is the basic practice of Chö.

a tripod made of three human skulls, each as large as Mount Meru. Then with the hooked knife in her right hand, she lifts the whole corpse and drops it into the skull-cup.

Now visualize in space above the skull a white syllable *hang* with the nature of nectar, and beneath the skull the vertical stroke of a syllable *A*,²⁰⁷ red, with the nature of fire:

hang



vertical stroke of A



As you say "Om Ah Hung," fire blazes up from the stroke of the *A* and heats the skull-cup until the corpse melts into a bubbling nectar, which boils up and fills the whole skull. Everything foul and impure flows off in the form of a frothing scum. Steam rises from the nectar and touches the *hang*, heating it up by the contact. The *hang* exudes streams of red and white nectar, which drip down and blend together in an inseparable unity within the skull. The *hang* itself dissolves into light and melts into the nectar too. Visualizing all this, recite:

P'et! Ridding myself of attachment to the body ...

and so on. Then, as you repeat "Om Ah Hung," visualize that the *om* purifies the nectar of all imperfections of colour, smell, taste and so on; the *ah* makes it increase many times over; and the *hung* transforms it into everything that could be wished for. It takes on the nature of the immaculate nectar²⁰⁸ of primal wisdom, manifesting as clouds of offerings that satisfy all possible desires.

Visualize in the sky in front of you a throne piled with silken cushions, on which is seated your gracious root teacher in person. Above him are the lineage teachers, around him are all the yidams, and below in the space above the skull-cup are the Seventy-five Glorious Protectors²⁰⁹ and all the hosts of other Dharma protectors, both the wisdom protectors and the protectors constrained by the effect of their past actions, along with the deities of the locality and owners of the ground.

Below the skull, visualize all beings of the six realms and the three worlds, among whom your principal guests are the eighty-four thousand types of obstacle makers, the fifteen great demons that prey on children, and, in short, all those who create obstacles and to whom you owe karmic debts, teeming like the countless specks of dust in a sunbeam.

1. The white feast for the guests above

Now visualize that your root teacher, the lineage teachers and all the assembled Buddhas and Bodhisattvas above his head all imbibe the nectar through their tongues, which have the form of hollow vajra tubes.²¹⁰ As a result, you complete the accumulations, you are freed of your obscurations, your violations and breaches of the samaya are purified and you attain both the common and supreme accomplishments.

The yidams and deities of the four and six classes of tantra surrounding the teacher also consume the nectar, absorbing it through hollow tongues whose shapes correspond to the symbol associated with each deity—a vajra, wheel, jewel, lotus, or crossed vajra.* As a result you complete the accumulations, clear away your obscurations, purify all violations and breaches of samaya, and attain the common and supreme accomplishments.

The dakas, dakinis, Seventy-five Glorious Protectors and all the other Dharma protectors now also take their share of the nectar through the hollow sunbeams of their tongues. You complete the accumulations and are freed from all obscurations; all obstacles and circumstances unfavourable to the Dharma and the attainment of enlightenment are dispelled. All the favourable circumstances and good things that you seek are intensified.

2. The white feast for the guests below

Next, if you are experienced in visualization, continue to visualize yourself as the Wrathful Black True Mother and from your heart send out swarms of activity-performing dakinis—white, yellow, red, green and blue, like myriads of specks of dust dancing in the sun's rays. Imagine them satisfying all beings throughout the six realms and the three worlds, as they offer to each a wisdom skull-cup filled with immaculate nectar.

If you are less experienced in visualization, imagine that you yourself—the Wrathful Black Mother—use the skull-cup in your left hand to scoop nectar out of the great skull and scatter it, so that it rains down everywhere in the six realms and the three worlds of existence. All beings drink it and are utterly satisfied.

* These are the symbols of the five Buddha families.

3. The variegated feast for the guests above

Again, steam rises from the boiling nectar, giving rise to inconceivable clouds of offerings. Offer them to the guests above: fresh water for their feet, flowers, incense, lamps, perfumed water, foodstuffs and music, the eight auspicious symbols and seven attributes of royalty, parasols, victory-banners, canopies, golden wheels with a thousand spokes, white conches spiralling to the right, and more. As a result, you and all beings complete the accumulations and are cleansed of all obscurations.

4. The variegated feast for the guests below

Now come the guests below, namely all the beings of the six realms of existence. Whatever each of them desires pours down on them like rain, satisfying them and filling them with joy.

Think particularly of those beings to whom you have been indebted in all your lives until now in samsara without any beginning. We have all kinds of debts due to past actions: debts that shorten our lives because we have killed; debts that make us poor because we have stolen; debts that plague us with sickness because we have attacked and beaten others; debts for protection given by superiors, for services rendered by inferiors, and for help and support from equals; debts to overlords and underlings,²¹¹ to loved ones, friends, subjects, children and livestock; debts for the food we have eaten and the clothes we have worn, for the money we have borrowed, for the milk we have milked, for the loads we have had carried and for the fields we have ploughed, and for whatever else we may have used.

All of those karmic creditors, whether male and female, want to vengeance themselves on your flesh and bones, shorten your lifespan and snatch away your life-force. They gather round holding containers, running after you and demanding repayment. The offering is transformed into an inexhaustible treasury of everything desirable, which rains down upon them, bringing each of them whatever they most wish. It brings food for those who want food, clothing for those who want clothing, wealth for those who want wealth, gardens for those who want gardens, horses for those who want horses, houses to live in for those who want houses, and friends and loved ones for those who want friends and loved ones.

When each of them has enjoyed these things you are freed from your karmic obligations. Your debts are repaid. You are delivered from those deadly avengers and purified of all your harmful deeds and obscurations. Everyone is satisfied and happy.

Then imagine that for all those who may have been left behind—the lowly, the weak, the crippled, the blind, the deaf, the dumb and all beings in the six realms who are tortured and worn out by suffering—the offering becomes whatever they may need. It turns into a refuge for those with no refuge, a protector for those who have no protector, friendly assistance for those with no support, loved ones and friends for the lonely, land for the landless, medicines to cure the sick, life-restoring elixirs for the dying, miraculous legs for the crippled, eyes of wisdom for the blind, immaculate ears for the deaf, wisdom tongues for the dumb,²¹² and so on. These beings all enjoy the gifts and are satisfied, delivered from all the effects of actions, sufferings and habitual tendencies of each of the six realms. All the males reach the level of sublime Avalokiteshvara, all the females reach the level of noble Tara, and the three worlds of samsara are liberated to their very depths.

Continue to recite “Om Ah Hung” until you have completed this whole visualization. Then recite the passage:

P’et! The guests of the offering above ...

down to the words:

... uncontrived Great Perfection. Ah!

Then rest in the state beyond any concept of an offering, an offerer or a recipient of the offerings.

In the Chö texts there are usually four great feasts: white, red, variegated and black. But in this one there is no red or black feast.

What today’s so-called Chö practitioners mean by Chö is a grisly process of destroying malignant spirits by slashing, chopping, chasing and killing them. Their idea of Chö involves being constantly full of anger. Their bravado is nothing more than hatred and pride. They imagine that they have to behave like the henchmen of the Lord of Death. For example, when they practise Chö for a sick person, they work themselves into a furious display of rage, staring with hate-filled eyes as large as saucers, clenching their fists, biting their lower lips, lashing out with blows and grabbing the invalid so hard that they tear the clothes off his back. They call this subduing spirits, but to practise Dharma like that is totally mistaken. Machik Labdrön says:

Since time without beginning, harmful spirits have lived in a ceaseless whirl of hallucination and suffering, brought on by their own evil actions and by inauspicious circumstances which drive them like a

wind. When they die they inevitably plunge to the very depths of the lower realms. With the hook of compassion I catch those evil spirits. Offering them my warm flesh and warm blood as food, through the kindness and compassion of bodhichitta I transform the way they see everything and make them my disciples. Those malignant spirits are for me the prize that I hold with the hook of compassion—but the great adepts of Chö of the future will boast of killing them, beating them and casting them out. That will be a sign that false doctrines of Chö, the teachings of demons, are spreading.

All the various false Chö practices that she predicted, such as the Ninefold Black Chö, are only the result of thinking that one can subjugate spirits through violence, without the love and compassion of bodhichitta.

A person who uses those practices might just be able to overcome one or two puny little elemental spirits, but if he encounters any really vicious ones, they will attack his life in retaliation—as has been seen to happen on many occasions.

It is particularly difficult for practitioners to tell whether signs of success which occur on the path—the subjugation of a demon, or the experience of some kind of blessing, for instance—are authentic signs of progress, or whether they are in fact obstacles created by demonic forces.

People possessed by malicious spirits usually seem to have clairvoyance and supernatural powers. But as time goes on they get further and further from the genuine Dharma, until not even the tiniest scrap of goodness is left in them. The mountains of offerings that might be heaped upon them are just karmic debts for the future, and even in this life do them no good. In the end they find it hard to scrape together enough to eat or wear. And what they do have, they cannot bear to use up. When they die, they are sure to be reborn in an ephemeral hell or some such realm, as we have already mentioned.²¹³

III. THE MEANING OF CHÖ

The so-called spirits to be destroyed in Chö practice are not anywhere outside. They are within us. All the hallucinations that we perceive in the form of spirits outside ourselves arise because we have not eradicated the conceit²¹⁴ of believing in an “I” and a “self.” As Machik says:

The tangible demon, the intangible demon,
The demon of exultation and the demon of conceit—
All of them come down to the demon of conceit.²¹⁵

This thing we call a spirit is in fact the demon of conceit, the belief in a self. Machik also says:

"The many spirits" means concepts;
 "The powerful spirit" means belief in a self;
 "The wild spirits" means thoughts.
 To destroy these spirits is to be an adept of Chö.

Jetsun Mila's conversation with the Ogress of the Rock included these words:

Belief in an "I" is more powerful than you are, demoness.
 Concepts are more numerous than you are, demoness.
 Thoughts are more spoilt by habits than you are, demoness.

He also classified the various kinds of Chö as follows:

Outer Chö is to wander in fearsome places and mountain
 solitudes;
 Inner Chö is to cast away one's body as food;
 Absolute Chö is to sever the root once and for all.
 I am a yogi who possesses these three kinds of Chö.

All Chö practices are therefore to cut through the belief in a self, which is the root of all ignorance and deluded perceptions. This is what is meant by the line "absolute Chö is to sever the root once and for all." External demons are just deluded perceptions, and as long as you do not destroy your belief in a self, trying to kill them will not put them to death. Beating them will have no effect on them. Trampling them will not crush them. Chasing after them will not make them go away. Unless you sever the root, which is the conceit within you, you will no more be able to annihilate the illusory spirits which are its external manifestation than get rid of smoke without putting out the fire. The Ogress of the Rock told Jetsun Mila:

If you don't know that demons come from your own mind,
 There'll be other demons besides myself!
 I'm not going to leave just because you tell me to go.

and Jetsun Mila said:

Take a demon as a demon and it'll harm you;
 Know a demon's in your mind and you'll be free of it;
 Realize a demon to be empty and you'll destroy it.

And again:

You who appear as harmful spirits and yakshas, male or female,
 Only when one has no understanding are you demons,
 Bringing all your mischief and your obstacles.
 But once one understands, even you demons are deities,
 And become the source of all accomplishments.

Chö does not mean killing, thrashing, casting out, crushing and destroying demons, but cutting away the root of any belief in them from within. We must understand that the thing to be destroyed is not outside; it is within us.

Generally speaking, most other religious traditions teach an aggressive approach to outer hostile forces and external creators of obstacles, using the sharpness, severity and power of violent methods, the points of arrows and spears, all directed outwards. But our tradition is as Jetsun Mila says:

My system is to cut out the belief in a self at the root, to cast the eight ordinary concerns to the winds, and to make the four demons feel ashamed.

Direct all your practice inwards and mobilize all your strength, skill and powers against the belief in a self that dwells within you. To say, "Eat me! Take me away!" once is a hundred times better than crying, "Protect me! Save me!" To offer yourself as food to a hundred spirits is better than calling on a hundred protection deities for help.

We entrust the sick to the demons.
 We rely on our enemies to guide us.
 One "Devour me! Carry me off!"
 Is better than "Protect me! Save me!" hundreds of times.
 This is the venerable Mother's²¹⁶ tradition.

If you cut your belief in demons at the root from within, you will perceive everything as pure, and, as the saying goes:

Demons change into Dharma protectors, and those protectors' faces change into the face of the nirmanakaya.

People today who claim to be practitioners of Chö do not understand any of this, and persist in thinking of spirits as something outside themselves. They believe in demons, and keep on perceiving them all the time; in everything that happens they see some ghost or *gyalgong*. They have no peace of mind themselves, and are always bewildering others with their

lies, delivered with much assertive blustering:

"There's a ghost up there! And down there, too, a spirit! That's a ghost! That's a demon! That's a *tser*! I can see it ... Ha!—I've got it, I've killed it! Watch out, there's one lying in wait for you! I've chased it away! There—it looked back!"

Spirits and pretas know what such people are up to, and follow them around wherever they go. They might take possession of women who fall easily into trances, for example, and convincingly proclaim all sorts of things: "I am a god," "I am a ghost," "I am your old father," "I am your old mother," and so on. Sometimes they announce, "I am the deity, I am a Dharma protector. I am Damchen," and speak of supernatural visions or make false predictions.

Demons fool the lamas and the lamas fool their patrons, or, as the saying goes, "The son fools his father while enemies fool the son." These are manifest signs of the degenerate age, and show that the demons are taking over. As the Great Master of Uddiyana prophesied:

In the decadent age, male spirits will enter men's hearts;
Female spirits will enter women's hearts;
Goblins will enter children's hearts;
Samaya-breakers will enter the clergy's hearts.
There will be a spirit in every single Tibetan's heart.

And:

When goblins are taken for gods, a time of suffering will come upon Tibet.

These prophecies have come to pass.

Do not be taken in by that false perception that makes gods, spirits and obstacle-makers appear outside you; that would only reinforce it. Train yourself to see everything as a dream-like display or an illusion. The phenomena of spirits on the one hand and sick people on the other, appearing momentarily as aggressor and victim, both arise from the negative actions and distorted perceptions which link them together in that way. Do not take sides, do not love the one and hate the other. Generate the love and compassion of bodhichitta towards both. Sever at the root all your self-concern and belief in an "I," and give your body and life to the spirits as food without holding back. Pray from the depths of your heart that these beings may take an interest in the true Dharma and pacify their hatred and maliciousness, and then explain the teachings.²¹⁷

When you finally cut through all belief in the duality of aggressor and

victim, deities and demons, self and others—and all the resulting concepts of hope and fear, attachment and hatred, good and bad, pleasure and pain—you will find, as it is said:

Neither deity, nor demon: the confidence of the view.
Neither distraction, nor fixation: the vital point of the meditation.
Neither acceptance, nor rejection: the vital point of the action.
Neither hope, nor fear: the vital point of the result.

When all concepts of anything to be cut and anyone to do the cutting dissolve into the expanse of absolute reality where all things are equal, the inner harmful spirit of conceit is severed at the root. That is the sign that you have realized the absolute and ultimate Chö.

*I understand that there is no self, but still have gross concepts
of "I."
I have decided to renounce duality, but am beset by hopes and
fears.
Bless me and all those like me who believe in a self
That we may realize the natural state, the absence of self.*