

Story of One Delog

As a child in Tibet, I sometimes found my mother, Delog Dawa Drolma, surrounded by an audience listening with utmost attention as she told of her journeys to other realms. Her face was radiant as she spoke of the deities in the pure realms; tears flowed as she described the miseries of hell beings and *pretas*, or tormented spirits.

She told of encountering deceased relatives of certain people, and she relayed from the dead to the living concerns about unfinished business (perhaps buried coins or jewels that could not be located) or pleas for prayers and ceremonies.

She also brought back spiritual advice from high lamas who had passed from this world, to which lamas on this side of death responded with deep respect.

My mother was revered throughout Tibet for her extraordinary powers as a lama, but she was more famous for being a *delog* (pronounced DAY-loak), one who has crossed the threshold of death and returned to tell about it.

Hers was not a visionary or momentary near-death experience. For five full days she lay cold, breathless, and devoid of any vital signs, while her consciousness moved freely into other realms, often escorted by the wisdom goddess White Tara.

She undertook her journey as a *delog* according to instructions she had received from Tara in visions, but against the wishes of her lamas, who pleaded with her not to take such a risk.

It is remarkable that she, a young woman of sixteen, had so much confidence in her meditation that she prevailed over very wise, much older lamas.

However, she herself had been recognized as an emanation of White Tara, a powerful force of enlightened mind for the longevity and liberation of sentient beings.

Throughout her childhood Dawa Drolma showed a remarkable depth of compassion. No beggar who came to our tent left without her offering whatever she could put her hands on – my family took to hiding its valuables lest she give them away.

Our family's black felt tent could hold four hundred people during great ceremonies. Dawa Drolma was honored with a throne along with the other high lamas, including her four uncles, who were famous throughout eastern Tibet. She herself was a perfectionist in the performance of ritual.

Several years ago, I met a monk who remembered her wrath when he blew his *kangling* (ceremonial trumpet) poorly. Her presence inspired both care in the effortful steps of practice and recognition that the underlying nature of these steps is effortless awareness.

Her dreams and visions were revelations of realization, and those leading up to her *delog* experience were unmistakably clear in their instructions.

The fears of the lamas who urged her not to undertake such a journey, but rather to fast, take medicine, and perform ceremonies, were not groundless, however – after she had died and gone to Padmasambhava’s pure realm, she met her late uncle, the revered master Khakyod Wangpo, who warned her that it would be dangerous for her to remain and told her that she should return to the human realm to benefit beings.

Later, when she travelled through the *bardo*, or intermediate state between death and rebirth, and the hell and *preta* realms, an emanation of the feminine deity Vajravarahi expressed doubt that Dawa Drolma would be able to bring about much benefit. “It may be necessary for you, my girl, to return to the human realm. But...having taken rebirth as a woman, you will have little authority.... Sentient beings in these degenerate times will be hard put to believe that your accounts are true.”

White Tara took issue with this statement, saying, “She is a heroine with a courageous mind,” and adding that she had not listened to those who had tried to delay her. “If she goes back to the world of humans, she can tell of the moral choices of accepting virtuous actions and rejecting harmful ones. She can turn the minds of sentient beings.”

The direct experience of other realms did indeed invest my mother with great spiritual authority when she taught of correct conduct and karmic cause and effect. No one doubted her words, not only because great lamas such as Tromge Trungpa had witnessed her corpse coming back to life, but also because she knew the whereabouts of buried coins and actions of the deceased before their deaths—things that she could not possibly have known without having been told directly by those she encountered as a *delog*.

Later in her life, one of the most generous contributors to her projects was a Tibetan businessman who had been an adamant nonpractitioner of religion until my mother conveyed to him information about buried money from his deceased sister.

Delog Dawa Drolma’s account here is as vivid as that of a tourist describing a country he or she has visited, yet hers is really a journey of consciousness through the pure and impure displays of mind.

It begins when, as instructed by Tara, "I let my mind settle. In a spacious and extremely blissful frame of mind, I experienced a state of sheer lucidity.... I was fully aware of the fundamental condition of my mind in all its ordinariness. Because that awareness was unimpeded, it was as though I could hear all sounds and voices in all lands, not just those in my immediate environment."

When ordinary grasping and aversion and the ignorance of object-subject duality completely fall away, one experiences uncontrived, naked awareness – absolute, nondual, beyond concept, emptiness replete with all pure qualities and the potential to manifest as appearance inseparable from emptiness. This is buddha nature, obscured and unrecognized in sentient beings, but completely revealed in enlightened ones.

To provide benefit, enlightened beings spontaneously emanate realms of pure appearance such as Padmasambhava's Copper-Colored Mountain of Glory, Avalokiteshvara's Potala Mountain, and Tara's Yulokod. Practitioners who have purified their mind streams and who have accumulated vast merit through their virtue can experience pure realms in visions, in dreams, or, as my mother did, as a *delog*.

Her account is quite specific in its cosmological geography and detailed in its descriptions, yet it is clear that the realms she visited are the rich display of the nature of mind, experienced when meditation breaks through the limitations of ordinary perception.

The pure realms are the display of mind, but so also are the bardo state and the six destinations of rebirth. The difference is that the pure realms are the display of enlightened awareness, while the six realms and the bardo are the display of delusion and the projection of mind's poisons.

The hell realm is a projection of hatred and anger and the non-virtue of killing; the *preta* realm, a projection of avarice and craving; the animal realm, a projection of stupidity; that of the demigods, a projection of virtue tainted with jealousy; that of the gods, a projection of virtue tainted with pride; the human realm, a projection of a mixture of all five poisons combined with at least enough virtue to prevent rebirth in lower realms.

Fortunate human rebirth is founded in a large measure of virtue and enables one to practice a spiritual path. My mother used to say, "No matter how difficult your life is as a human being, there is no comparison between the difficulties here and the miseries in lower existences."

Humans and animals share this world and with it a tendency to see things as very solid, substantial.

When death separates the mind and body, and strips away the relative stability of form, the naked consciousness enters the after-death bardo state.

If liberation is not attained early on during the pure display of what is known as the *bardo of the true nature of reality*, one's consciousness is propelled into the bardo of becoming, after which it will take rebirth in one of the six realms of experience according to one's karma.

As if in a dream or hallucination, beings float in and out of Dawa Drolma's perception like flakes of snow.

In one instant she encounters an acquaintance enduring the most hideous torments of hell or a *preta* suffering the agonies of extreme deprivation; in the next she meets a virtuous person en route to a pure realm or a being in a god realm.

Occasionally, she sees whole processions of hell or bardo beings leaving for the pure realms, shepherded by a great lama or practitioner who by the power of his or her altruistic aspirations has come to save beings. This is truly what is meant when we pray to "dredge the depths of cyclic existence and liberate beings."

Dawa Drolma is confronted by Yama Dharmaraja, lord of death, and along with Tara sings him a song of realization:

If there is recognition, there is just this – one's own mind;

If there is no recognition, there is the great wrathful lord of death.

In actuality this is the victorious one, the dharmakaya Samantabhadra:

We offer homage and praises at the feet of Dharmaraja.

Despite the fact that the realms of cyclic existence are in the absolute sense empty in nature, mere projections of mind's delusions, on a relative level the suffering of beings trapped there is undeniable.

As Dharmaraja and his minions demonstrate again and again, no lies or pretenses mitigate one's karma. One's life passes before one's eyes with every good and bad deed clearly delineated; karmic results arise accordingly.

Dawa Drolma's chilling descriptions of the horrible consequences of killing and harming others clearly caution one to avoid such actions.

On the other hand, her captivating descriptions of the pure realms inspire one to practice deity meditation and to realize the qualities of mind's pure nature.

After death, even as karmic forces propel one's consciousness to rebirth in cyclic existence, if one has previously practiced well enough to have the presence of mind to invoke one's meditational deity with faith, one is instantaneously reborn in that deity's pure realm.

After her *delog* experience, Dawa Drolma made a pilgrimage to Lhasa, where she conceived me with her consort, a high lama. She lived with her parents until I was about four, then relocated to Tanp'hel Gonpa, a monastery about a week away by horseback. A house with a beautiful view was built high on a mountainside, and she lived there, revered as a lama and a dakini, a female embodiment of wisdom and enlightened activity. She later gave birth to my sister, T'hrinlay Wangmo, an extraordinary child who was eventually recognized as an incarnation of a wisdom yogini. Both my sister and I were wild, willful children, and I still sometimes feel overwhelming regret at the difficulties I caused my mother. She did not refrain from inflicting strict discipline, but she also affirmed that if I practiced dharma strongly and with pure motivation, I would be of benefit to beings. Her words deeply empowered my path.

In 1941 she died, shortly after giving birth to a baby boy, who himself died two years later. She was in her mid-thirties; I was eleven years old. Her body remained in meditation posture for some days, then collapsed, indicating that the consciousness had left. She was cremated on the roof of her house. Rainbows appeared, and five vultures, who in Vajrayana Buddhism symbolize the supreme perspective of the realized yogin, circled overhead. I am sure that she returned to the pure realms, but equally, I have no doubt that she also returned to the hell and *preta* realms to rescue whoever had a connection with her. She was absolutely fearless in her compassion.

I left Tibet in 1959, just ahead of the brutal Chinese consolidation of conquest. In 1982, after almost three decades without word from my family, I suddenly received a short letter from my sister in which she mentioned that she had the only copy of my mother's *delog* account. This was like a hook cast from Tibet to California, yet I could not seize it until five years later when China's political stance on Tibet had softened slightly.

When I finally visited T'hrinlay Wangmo, she told me that the text had been confiscated but she had learned who had it. During the terrible years of the Cultural Revolution, when religious texts were used as toilet paper by the Chinese, she could do nothing, but as soon as she felt safe, she offered an exorbitant sum to obtain the account. Only a few pages were missing.

I did not want to take the original away from her, but the Chinese in the Szechuan capital of Chengdu would not allow me to photocopy it. Knowing I might have to smuggle it out, I had brought Tibetan books from the United States and listed them on my customs declaration. I added the *delog* account to my collection and had no trouble transiting the airport.

A few years later, I returned to Tibet to give a copy to my sister. I still have the original, now more than sixty years old, taken down by a scribe in fine handwriting as Dawa Drolma told her story.

There are other *delog* accounts – one by another female practitioner, Delog Ling Zha Chhödron, is quite well known. The Tibetan Library of Works and Archives in Dharamsala houses at least a dozen.

Delogs were often women; some appeared to be ordinary laypeople, but the experience itself is a sign of great meditative realization, so they could not have been truly ordinary. Their narratives increased people's faith in the lamas' teachings about the unseen realms of existence.

I do not know if other accounts have been translated into Western languages. It is very fortunate that my connection with the excellent translator Richard Barron (Chökyi Nyima) and the very capable editor Mary Racine has brought forth the English translation of Dawa Drolma's account. Richard Barron is responsible for the lucid footnotes. Although the chapters were written with the three pure realms first and then the impure realms comprising a fourth chapter, the internal evidence of the text seems to indicate that the journey unfolded in the order published here: the Copper-Colored Mountain of Glory, the impure realms, Potala Mountain, and Yulokod. The final chapter, which was brought from eastern Tibet to the United States by my son, Jigme Tromge Rinpoche, in 1994, is a summary, primarily of Dawa Drolma's experiences in the impure realms.

To render the English more readable, the text is a somewhat free prose translation of the original Tibetan verse, rather than a strict literal translation. The phoneticization of Tibetan forms is based on a system employed by Padma Publishing.

The *delog* experience is extraordinary, marvellous, even within the esoteric context of Tibetan schools of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Yet Delog Dawa Drolma's account has the power and immediacy of direct experience, and I trust that those who read it will find that the phenomena of the realms correspond to aspects of their own mind's experience.

May her words inspire the highest spiritual attainment; may they guide whoever reads them to the dominions of the victorious ones.

Drolma, Delog Dawa. *Delog: Journey to the Realms Beyond Death*. Padma Publishing. Kindle Edition. "Introduction" by Chagdud Tulku.