

Journey to Bone and Ash



There was once an old woman called Dechen. People called her *Dechen Budhi* – Dechen, the old woman. She wasn't always old, of course. Once she was youthful, vibrant, very beautiful, with a slim, slight figure, high cheekbones, dimples, unusually large, dark eyes, smooth, clear skin like ivory, and thick, black hair. She took pride in her beauty and youth. A singer and dancer, she was adored and worshipped by men, and envied, if not hated, by women. The men courted her and lavished gifts and money on her, which she managed very carefully because she had known extreme poverty while she was growing up in a large family. She had eight siblings who were always inadequately clad, and she had experienced the death of two in the freezing winters. As a child Dechen was always hungry, like her brothers and sisters.

It was the custom of her polyandrous tribe for one woman to marry three or four brothers. “Even one husband,” she could hear her dead mother’s voice in her head, “is one too many. Managing four has brought me to an early grave.”

Dechen had determined early in life not to marry but support herself by her own talents, and because she had many of them, she became very wealthy.

Dechen worshipped all the gods of prosperity: Pehar, Ganesha, Lakshmi, and all the Naga goddesses who generate and protect wealth. She buried her money under straw and grass piles on the ground floor of her three-story stone, wood, and mud house, the

floor of which was used by cows, yaks and sheep. She even kept a few yaks and dogs on that floor to deflect attention from her secret hiding place, and hired the village idiot as a servant to graze and tend them.

In her mid-twenties, Dechen supplemented her wealth by weaving and tailoring woolen dresses that were much in demand. Both men and women wore them all year long in the high desert plateau where they lived. She also began to make *chhang*, the favorite stimulant of people in the winter months when the high plateau, home to some of the highest mountains in the world, was freezing cold. Dechen's *chhang*, however, was much more than just local beer made with barley. Using her grandmother's secret recipe, she fermented it with the best of yeasts and infused it with the highest quality cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, pepper and ginger. Moreover, she made it from the waters of Manasarovar, the healing, holy lake at the foot of the great Kailas Mountain, home of all the gods and goddesses of the Hindus, Tibetans, Jains and the indigenous Animist religions. Many swore Dechen's *chhang* was a tonic that cured them of colds, body and joint aches, stiffness and indigestion. People traveled far to buy it from her at a high price, and it swelled her wealth a hundred fold.

Because Dechen did not believe in sharing – a habit she had developed early in life on account of having altogether too many siblings to share food and clothing with – by the time she was thirty, not an inch remained beneath the entire mud floor that didn't have a thick wad of money or bags of coins. She had to find other secret places to store it all. She sacked the village idiot for fear he might accidentally discover it, got rid of her yaks because she didn't want to risk leaving her house to graze them, and spread a rumor that all her wealth had been stolen, and a lot eaten by silverfish. To confirm her lie, she began to wear rags even though she had exquisite dresses of Chinese silk and woolen brocade hoarded away in wooden trunks. She also pretended to be mad as a result of the "theft" of her money.

Dechen had no friends, but she didn't care. She was self-sufficient and content with her wealth, the very thought of which was enough to send her into paroxysms of ecstasy. She spent her time hollowing

out the legs of her bed and the frames of her looms to hide her money in and boarding up the windows.

In her early thirties, upon seeing a woman in the *haat* wearing an exquisite necklace made of gold, lapis, turquoise and coral, Dechen's lust for gold objects and jewelry was aroused. She decided that it wasn't enough to just have money that was hoarded away in various secret places of her home. She wanted to buy lovely objects that she could see, touch and admire – something real, solid, material and lovely.

For many years, with her house safely boarded up, she traveled far and wide, to India, Nepal, China, to find and buy up rare treasures made of gold and precious stones. She brought back her purchases – jewelry, mirrors, jars, boxes to hold her spices, finger rings, earrings, necklaces, and gold images of the gods and goddesses of wealth – hidden in ragged-looking gunny sacks filled with rice, kindling, lentils and dung.

She placed the gold statues of the gods and goddesses of wealth on an altar, bowed to and worshipped them three times a day: Lakshmi; Ganesh adorned with garlands of gems, his rat regurgitating jewels; Demchong Chintamani, guardian of wealth, holding the luminescing wish-fulfilling jewel of abundance in his hands. She had fallen in love with a statue of Vajrayogini, a female Buddha, and even though the goddess was not associated with wealth, she had bought it impulsively. It was only much later she saw some disturbing elements in the statue: Vajrayogini held the curved *driguk*, a fierce-looking flaying knife in her right hand, and the *kapala*, a skull cup in her left as she danced in fire. But because Dechen had paid so much for it, she kept it and placed it on the altar.

Buying, organizing, arranging, dusting, admiring her home filled with her precious purchases for hours on end in the light of the yak-butter lamps that illumined her dark house became Dechen's whole life. Her other favorite preoccupation and passion was wearing her silk brocade gowns, adorning herself with necklaces, earrings, nose rings, and admiring herself in her jeweled mirrors. How proud she was of having fulfilled her heart's desire to be wealthy and never lack

for anything! How proud she was of her beauty! Her intense attachment to her youth, her wealth, and her home were enough to give purpose to her life.

Dechen didn't realize then that having too much, and not sharing it, is worse than not having enough. She couldn't see how her obsession had made her a captive in her own home. She often wished she could hire servants to help with her many tasks, but since she didn't trust poor servants not to steal her things – any one of which would have helped them retire and live well for the rest of their lives – she had become her own servant and slave.

One day, however, as Dechen was sitting on the balcony on the third floor of her over-stuffed home, overlooking a playground in the village in which young children were playing, accompanied by their parents or older siblings, she felt something she hadn't felt before. She couldn't describe the feeling, but the first symptom of it was that she felt dreadfully lonely. She hurried inside to her pretty objects, lit her candles, and hoped they would cheer her up, but they failed to do so. The solitude to pursue her material passion turned into a haunting aloneness in which the walls of her self-made prison seemed to close in upon her.

A big, dark, frightening emptiness opened up inside her and she was certain she would fall into it and drown. As this was such a horrible feeling, and as she hadn't yet learned to give each feeling its due of attention and introspection, she now did everything in her power to ignore it, lock it up, throw it away, bury it.

But because she had buried a living and kicking feeling, it kept resurfacing, again and again. The only way she could think of banishing the feeling was buying more lovely things. So, wearing her rags and a cheap necklace of glass beads around her neck, she went on another tour. She bought turquoise artifacts and jewelry from China, amber beads from Tajikistan, coral and pearl necklaces from India, heaps and mounds of treasure to take back to her home.

Living her life the only way she knew how, without thought and reflection, Dechen didn't notice how Time was weaving its invisible net inside her body till she woke up one day and saw it in her jeweled

mirror: a network of wrinkles crisscrossing her face like the gossamer threads of a spider that had caught her eyes, nose, mouth in its web; gaps where her teeth had fallen; the thinning, grey hair on her head. She turned to another mirror, and yet another: each of them had turned traitor and reflected the same image of a face ravaged by time. Dechen threw them away in disgust; people started calling her *Dechen budhi*, old Dechen, and *paagal budhi*, the crazy old woman.

The old feeling of despair rose from its grave and haunted her in nightmares. She dreamt about missing caravans because she couldn't pack her enormous treasure in time to take it along with her, of not having enough mules to pack them on, of thieves breaking into her home and carrying it all away. These nightmares were mild in comparison to the darkest ones that emerged from the crack in her psyche: gods and goddesses she worshipped to fulfil her material lust turned hostile and came to her as dark, evil, wrathful, demonic forces bent on destroying her. Demchong, Mahakal, came to her with the ashes of the dead spread on his body, beating his drum louder and louder as he did his dreadful dance of destruction, and trampled Dechen underfoot; Vajrayogini came, her fierce third eye spurting fire that burnt down Dechen's house with Dechen in it, turning it all to ash. In yet another nightmare Vajrayogini stepped on Dechen's body, bent her head downward, snapping it till it reached down to her heart. In another she flayed Dechen with her knife, catching her blood in her skull cup and drinking it as if it were the most delicious of wines. Dechen felt possessed, taken over, inhabited by dark and evil forces.

In her desperation she called for a Buddhist Lama to do a *kurim*, an exorcism, to expel the evil spirits. He came with his *dorje*, a two-sided metal arrow, and *phurbu*, a staff, to drive them away and release Dechen from hell. But though the ceremony was elaborate and expensive, her nightmares continued. Next, she went to a *dhami*, the local spirit medium, and a *dangri*, an interpreter of the messages received by the *dhami*. The two would charge a great deal for their services. Besides, goats would have to be sacrificed and cooked for the village. Dechen was very reluctant to part with any of her wealth.

She would rather have bought another gold object. But on the verge of madness, she decided to go ahead with it.

With ashes smeared on his face, matted hair coiled on his head, the *laru*, a long hairpiece wrapped with silver threads, draped around his head and neck like Shiva's snake, a trident in one hand, and a two-sided *damaru* drum in the other, the *dhami* began the ceremony after drinking copious amounts of *chhang*. The *dangri* and *dhami* both beat their drums, accelerating from a slow and steady rhythm to a maddening tempo that chased all thoughts away from Dechen's head.

The *dhami* shook his hair free, his eyes rolled up in their sockets, his body quivered, his movements became spastic and uncontrolled as he went into a trance. He began to dance, laugh and cry as the gods and goddesses entered him, talking simultaneously and cacophonously. He began to make pronouncements in a language that was neither Nepali, Kumaoni, Tibetan, Hindi or Hoon, nor any recognizable dialect. Dechen couldn't understand a word. She looked to the *dangri*, who had the skill to interpret what sounded like gibberish to most people. He was silent a long time, trying to decipher the words while Dechen stood by them, looking lost and confused.

"The gods and goddesses are saying you have poverty of the soul. You must die," the *dangri* said.

Dechen felt a bolt of fear shoot through her. Her knees gave way and she fell in a heap on the ground, weeping and wailing.

"But isn't there anything I can do? I don't want to die!" She wept as thoughts about leaving behind her precious treasure stung her brain like serpents.

The *dhami* muttered some more, and after a pause the *dangri* said, "It seems like a waste but he says you should throw all your valuables into the Dhauli River. Or you *will* go mad and then die."

Dechen was devastated by the message. Her long-cherished treasure, dumped in the river! No, she thought, this was a plot by the *dhami* and *dangri* to divest her of her wealth. They would waylay, loot and kill her.

But as the days passed, her state of mind worsened. After much deliberation and vacillation she decided that very night to take a muleload of her wealth to the river. She packed gunny sacks with the first objects to fall into her hands, boxes full of jewelry, tea sets and jugs made of gold, and loaded them on the mule.

The moon lit the path as she made her way to the river in the middle of the night and very reluctantly dumped the contents of the sacks into the swift waters that carried them away.

Meanwhile, from the other shore, a man watched an old woman wearing a ragged *go pung gyan ma*, gown, a worn hat and shoes, remove sacks from her mule, and empty glittering objects into the river. After she left, he went to the spot and saw them being swept away. He waded in and retrieved a gold box full of jewelry. He was baffled, and decided to see if the event repeated itself the next night.

This time Dechen decided to rid herself of all the gods and goddesses from her altar. It was a beautiful night as she stepped out of her house with her mule loaded down with sacks. The moon was almost full in its reflected radiance, bright and lovely despite its blemishes, its orb floating past a dark cloud edged with golden light as if pushed by the gentle breezes flowing down through high mountain passes.

As she arrived by the banks of the Dhauli River and unloaded a sack, a man came towards her. Dechen was dreadfully afraid: he was going to kill her and steal all her things! But the thought that disturbed her much more was: "I can't die now! I haven't lived yet!"

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

Dechen was stunned by his words. Nobody had ever taken the trouble to ask her, nor had she ever asked herself this question. His words came to her like a revelation, peeling away hardened scabs on the many wounds of her heart, allowing long-ignored feelings to seep through. She sat down on a boulder and burst into tears.

The man just stood by her and waited as she wept, letting the wave of her emotion break and pass, careful not to interrupt her tears with words.

Dechen looked up at him with swollen eyes. He was about the same age as she was; his overgrown hair and unkempt beard were grey, his mouth missing a tooth or two. Though he wore red velvet boots that came up to his knees, a *bakkhu*, long robe, an embroidered cap on his head, and spoke in her language, Hoon, there was something about his looks and his accent that told her he was not a local man. Because his eyes were gentle when he looked at her, she surprised herself by her instinctive choice to trust him.

“I am Terry, an Englishman. I have lived in these regions for over thirty years,” he explained.

Dechen laughed out loud, something she hadn’t done since she was a child.

“I thought you were a thief!” she laughed. “How foolish of me to fear losing that which I myself am dumping into the river!”

“Tell me why,” Terry said.

Dechen burst into another heaving, wracking sobbing. Her madness had softened her to the point where she not only appreciated and valued, but craved real contact with a human being capable of listening with attention. Quieting down, she patted the boulder and invited him to sit by her.

“I’m very thirsty,” she said. Terry fetched some water from the river in his *kapala*, a skull cup, which, along with a knife and a *kangling*, a horn made of a human femur, hung from his leather belt. Dechen was afraid again – the skull cup was an image from her nightmares. But her thirst made her reach for it and take a long draught.

Dechen told Terry her whole story. He listened without interruption as she spoke, wept, and opened up the sack of her heart, stuffed with sorrow and fear. He was silent a long time and then said to her.

“When I was in England, I too found myself buying too much, accumulating too much, consuming too much. When my marriage broke up – I have no doubt because of my own unconscious feelings about wanting more than I was getting in my marriage, I indiscriminately went through many women. Then one day I asked

myself the question, ‘What hunger are you trying so desperately to fill?’ The answer came to me with total clarity: all desperate hungers, like yours, like mine, seek only one food: the divine within and without us. All our striving must be to clear away the weeds that choke the divine inside us. When we find it inside ourselves, we find it reflected in the whole world.”

Dechen was quiet.

“Let me see what you have brought to give away to the river today,” Terry said.

Together they unloaded the sacks. Terry opened one of them and brought out the statue of Vajrayogini.

“Throw her away,” Dechen exclaimed. “I hate her!”

Terry held it in his hand lovingly. Dechen once more questioned his motives, and once more laughed out aloud.

“Don’t hate her,” Terry said to Dechen. “She is your best friend, a guide, a heavenly messenger who has been speaking to you in your dreams and has come to bring you that which no money can buy: peace, joy, happiness, love.”

“She hurt me terribly in my dreams!”

“They were the wounds inflicted by your perverse passions, Dechen.”

“No, it was her! She tried to kill me! She did kill me!” Dechen cried.

“She kills our old, wornout selves that do not serve us any longer, like the tight skins of snakes, that have to be shed if we are to grow into our fullness. I have worshipped her for many years, not as a statue, which is only a representation and reminder, but as an energy that pervades the universe, an energy we have named Vajrayogini. She is the reason why I left England, where I was wealthy, but very unhappy, lost, confused, aimless, to come live in your land, abandoning my religion to find a home in yours. Vajrayogini tramples on distorted desires, worldly wealth, and the small, unconscious ego. She is the one who transformed my many material passions into the light of consciousness; now I live each moment with the awareness of the impermanence of everything, including my body. You already

know, I am sure, that drinking and eating from a human skull serves as a reminder of the dream-like nature of our bodies and possessions. Vajrayogini comes to destroy false illusions, delusions, ignorance, and bestows wisdom. She has blessed you by throwing her thunderbolt at you with full force; your wounds are invaluable; they will turn you towards the path of the Invisible Spirit, the dark and light filled, male and female primal energy of the universe; the energy of which all our lamas, rinpoches, gurus, gods and goddesses are emissaries. Open your heart wide and accept the death she is offering, Dechen; it is the beginning of new life.”

Even though Dechen didn’t understand everything he was saying, she listened intently. All her suffering had prepared her, like soil is prepared by the wounds of the plough, to receive the seeds of wisdom, our only true treasure, which transmutes lead into gold. She looked at Terry with tears in her eyes. Someone had finally taken the time to teach her her own religion, which was so rich in meaning.

“Are you married?” she asked, directly.

“No. I always thought spiritual development was more important than being a householder.”

“And I have always thought that material possessions were more important than a family and love,” she said, sadly.

“I have an idea,” he said, sitting down on a mound and stroking his beard. “Instead of just dumping all your treasure in the river where it will be of no use to the fish, why don’t you use your wealth to do some good?”

“Like what?”

“Let me see,” he said, scratching his beard and looking thoughtful. “You know, so many pilgrims from so many countries and so many religions – Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bonpo, Animists – come to Kailas every season. I myself have traveled to the holy mountain and done the *kora* more times than I can count. I can tell you from my own experience that the pilgrims have to brave many hardships on the way: hail, storms, snow, tornadoes, avalanches, blizzards, freezing cold, hunger, thirst, and countless other tribulations. I have had to sleep in hollows of ice to keep myself warm; the only

habitations on the way are filthy and I couldn't rest in them because of the fleas and lice. Once I slept with lambs to keep from freezing. I have eaten whatever leaves I could find, and gotten diarrhea and a terrible upset stomach and lain on the snow encased in an inch of ice, my half-starved mule, collapsing with weakness and cold, lying next to me. Once it broke my heart to see the poor beast eating dry dung in his hunger."

Dechen saw tears in Terry's eyes as he recalled the event. She realized how her lust to accumulate, her avarice, greed and selfishness had hardened her heart so much that there was no room in it for others. She looked at her mule, standing by the river, loaded down with sacks full of heavy gold, and realized how little, if at all, she had thought about anyone but herself. But seeing the tears in Terry's eyes, her heart opened wide. Concentric circles of compassion radiated out from it to Terry, her mule, the hardships of the pilgrims and all the suffering people and creatures of the world.

"On my journeys," Terry continued, "I often wondered why there aren't any *dharmashalas*, buildings that provide food and shelter to pilgrims at points along the way. It would be such a caring thing to do. Think, Dechen, of how many *dharmashalas* we could set up on pilgrimage routes with all this wealth."

The *we* in his sentence made Dechen's heart leap into her mouth.

"Yes," she said, happily. "Yes, let's do it."

Terry looked at Dechen. Her small, long face, unmistakably Tibetan, was a mass of wrinkles, her eyes grown smaller with age. He saw beyond it to a beauty that bordered on luminescence, as that of the moon. He smiled at the image of two-ratty looking people in ragged garments, both of flesh and dress, planning a future together.

Dechen looked at the old Englishman who looked like a tiger that had allowed time and age to work their magic on him, and felt a great warmth suffusing her heart.

In the long silence that followed as they sat under the stars, Terry removed the flute made of a human thigh bone from his belt, and began to play it. The, deep, haunting, eerie, harmonious sound

singing its urgent reminder of our unshunnable journey to bone and ash, drove home its message and dissolved whatever doubts and resistance remained in Dechen.

They loaded the sack with the gold divinities onto the mule again and tied them down.

“Come,” he said, turning the mule around to face the village. “Let’s give some of this away to needy people, make our plans for the *dharmashalas*, and get you some nice garments to wear. This is no way for a rich lady to dress.”

“I have many,” Dechen said. “But they may be all moth-eaten by now.”

Day was dawning as they walked together to her house in the village. Released of her heavy burden, Dechen’s steps were light and buoyant as she walked straight and tall beside Terry in the early morning. As the sun poured liquid gold on the trees and rooftops of houses, Dechen, vibrantly aware of the fleeting nature of all phenomena, including herself, looked at everything with new eyes. She found reality pulsing with an intensity she had never felt before.

A sweet love, the kind that can only happen later in life when youthful passions are spent, sprang up between the two people who had known aloneness so intimately. Together, Dechen *budhi* and Terry *budha* worked towards their goal, building well-stocked *dharmashalas* for pilgrims in Darma, Tibet and in the Humla, Jumla and Bajhang areas of Nepal. If a pilgrim looks closely at the surroundings of a temple in Darma, she can see a weathered statue of Dechen *budhi*, the woman who transformed from a dragon hoarding treasure to a compassionate being capable of sharing and caring for those in need.