

Cutting free without losing anything

This is a short excerpt from a two-day teaching James Low gave in Berlin over the weekend of 7-8 May 2011. It was transcribed by Jo Féat and revised by James Low.

In the practice of *chod* we cut the root of difficulties. In fact, *chod* means to cut, to cut off, to sever. We can focus on cutting the object (i.e. that which seems to trouble us) or we can focus on cutting the subject (i.e. all the feelings thoughts and sensations which constitute our sense of being a person who is troubled). It doesn't really matter which one we cut since when you cut the connection between subject and object they both dissolve. Subject and object are mutually validating through their interaction, and when that activity ceases the absence of individual essence and substance in both is revealed and they dissolve or resolve in their own spacious ground.

The ego is a dualistic formation, a sense of self which requires the sense of another to hold it in place and give it shape, albeit a temporary and contingent location and shape. It functions as a composite of factors governed by self-reflexive consciousness. Consciousness (*rNam-Par Shes-Pa*) indicates that one knows something, that there is a knowable object and a knowing subject. Consciousness also indicates apprehension: getting hold of something in a way which seems to affirm the existence of both the grasper and the grasped.

Mahayana buddhism points to eight consciousnesses¹. Each of the six senses has its own consciousness and each operates in relation to a class of object. For example, when we are walking down the road, looking around, maybe chatting with a friend, we are probably not very aware of our sense of smell. And then we walk past a garden with a wonderful flowering bush and suddenly the scent comes to us. On the basis of the aroma arising from the bush and the activation of the sense organ for smell, the consciousness of smell arises. These three things operate at the same time: the object, the sense organ, and the consciousness. The sense consciousnesses are taken to include mental consciousness, which is the capacity to organise the richness of phenomena into the patterns of experience that are familiar to us.

The seventh consciousness is linked to our personal habits of the five afflictions: stupidity, pride, jealousy, aversion, and desire. These are evoked in response to mental consciousness. So we might become conscious of this wonderful scent and then think, *'Oh no! Since I have asthma this is going to be a bad day for me. Why do all these people need to have gardens? I live in a city because I want to get away from nature.'*

The eighth consciousness is said to be the ground consciousness and it gives us access to all the varied thoughts and experiences in the entirety of samsara. It is the basis for the many and different thoughts which come into our mind. We may find ourselves with a feeling and we don't know why we have this feeling, it's just there. It has been evoked by the patterning of the contents of the mind unfolding as subject-object experience. Each

¹ Visual (or eye) consciousness; auditory (or ear) consciousness; olfactory (or nose) consciousness; taste (or tongue) consciousness; touch (or body) consciousness; mental (or mind) consciousness; affliction-pervaded consciousness; ground-of-all consciousness.

of these eight consciousnesses is a pattern of relatedness rather than a fixed thing. If there is no scent there is nothing for us to smell, but if the nerve endings in our nose and mouth have gone dead we wouldn't be able to smell anyway. If the consciousness that deals with smell is damaged then even if there are many perfumes around nothing will register for us.

To free ourselves from this on-going action-reaction we can learn to cut loose the entanglement of sense object, sense organ and sense consciousness. When cut in this way these powerful forces which seem to catch us so easily are revealed as being empty of inherent self-nature, and we start to see that samsara is indeed like a dream.

CUTTING FREE OF THE FOUR DEMONS

Machig Labdron, the great Tibetan yogini, developed the practice of 'cutting free'² together with Phadampa Sangye. She said, "*You have to cut the four maras/demons³ in the dharmadhatu.*" The dharmadhatu is the space of becoming, the infinite empty host which offers hospitality to whatever is occurring. Just as the mirror, through its emptiness, is able to show the reflection of whatever is put in front of it, so the dharmadhatu is the site whose unobstructed openness reveals whatever is occurring as appearance free of essence and substance.

Mara means demon, something that causes trouble. For example when Buddha Shakyamuni was at the point of awakening he was attacked by many different demons intent on distracting him. There were demons attempting to provoke desire, fear, anger, and so on. Sometimes such demons appear to be substantial objective forces out there in the world and sometimes they appear to be subjective phenomena operating on a psychological level. Object and subject are always moving together and the focal point of attention can rapidly move from the 'thing' that occurs for us to our response to it. To be caught by a demon means to be caught up in something without recognising the nature of our involvement. So to free ourselves we have to cut our attachment to, or binding by, seemingly substantial external objects and seemingly insubstantial internal objects. These are the first two demonic modes, the tangible and the intangible.

When we consider the glass of water that I am holding it seems obvious that the glass-ness of the glass is in the glass and that this is an objective fact, the true status of something out there in the world. Looking in this way we don't recognise that this seeming truth is in fact an experience or an interpretation which arises for us in relation to the potential of the appearance. When we close down the potential of the object by cutting it adrift from the interpretation of the subject we fall under the power of the demon of the substantial external object. I am then living in a world of things which are other than me and which impact me. There is only one of me but there are many, many things out there. In fact it is as if I am surrounded by objects and have to work out what is helpful and what is harmful. The on-going need to do this can be overwhelming. Objects arise as distracting and controlling

² Chod (*gChod*)

³ The four demons are: *Thogs bCas Kyi bDud*, the tangible demon; *Thogs Med Kyi bDud*, the intangible demon; *dGa' sPro Yi bDud* (or *dGa' Brod bDud*), the demon of excitation; and *sNyems Byed Kyi bDud*, the demon of conceitedness.

demons and our own subject-formations of habits, expectations, hopes and fears also arise as demons.

The third demon we need to cut is that of exaltation and excitement. It refers to the excited exhilarating relationship that we encourage towards our own experience. Essentially it means taking ourself and our situation so intently and seriously that we lose our ground and our balance. The desire to achieve happiness and satisfaction intoxicates us and we get carried away. Rather than trying to control each instance of arousal, we need to cut our availability to be caught by our longing for the buzz of something special happening.

If we think of our experience during the course of a day we probably feel most alive when we feel a true connection with someone else. Maybe a friend phones us and asks, *"Fancy a coffee?"* and suddenly we feel better. We get on our bicycle and off we go, enjoying this feeling of a positive mood arising in us. We might think, *'Ah ha! This is the real me! This is how I should be all the time. Why is it not? I need to make changes in my life so that I always feel like this!'* But of course this situation and its consequent impulses do not last.

Why would we want to cut something as exciting as this? Because the intoxication hides what is actually happening. Desire for one special thing blinds us to everything else. The object of excitement becomes foreground and everything else becomes invisible. If excited arousal becomes the identifying sign that life is good then most life situations will not be satisfying.

Here in Berlin, at anytime day or night, outside the cheap beer shops, you can see people who have a particular genetic modification. They are born with a clenching hand. If there is a can inside the hand they feel okay but if the fingers of the hand start to unwind and release a now empty can they start to feel a bit twitchy. When a full can is installed in the welcoming grasp they give a sigh of relief. *"Ah, now I am fulfilling my fate. I know who I am with my can!"* Well, we all act like this with various objects and habits. We each, for example, have particular rhythms and identifications that feel just right for us. While this familiarity and repetition can feel reassuring it also means that we give a very narrow welcome to the rich potential of the world. We are looking for the things that make us feel the way we want to feel. Cutting loose from the demon of excitation means to cut our fixation on the narrow attitudes that makes much of the world invisible or irrelevant for us.

The fourth demon to be cut is the desire for status and worldly position. This refers to positioning ourselves in the world in such a way that other people will think we are okay, even special. Most of us have some degree of social anxiety. We want people to like us and we worry about what other people think about us. Because we cannot read other people's minds but can only develop our own idea of what they might be thinking or feeling, when we change our behaviour to try and please other people, the person that we are trying to please is a person in our own head, not the actual person outside. We have a fantasy about how the other person is likely to see us and we adapt our behaviour to our fantasy of what they might think. You can see how disturbing this might be, always having to anticipate the expectations of others! If we can't relax and live in our own skin we end up being false in order to feel accepted. Then we will never

be settled or at peace, because a manipulative relationship with the world is itself very troubling.

This is illustrated by a Tibetan story. A yogi goes into retreat in a cave on a hill. He has a sponsor who is a rich person with a big house down in the valley, and the sponsor says that he will come back in six months time on full moon day. In the intervening time, the yogi does his practice and doesn't think of anything else. But then he remembers that it will soon be the full moon day of the sponsor's return. He looks around his cave and suddenly notices that his altar has fallen in because he has been focussed solely on his meditation. He decides to do some spring-cleaning. He sweeps out all the dirt and lays a new bed of leaves and branches for himself. He cleans the altar and polishes all the cups. Everything looks good! Suddenly it hits him that he is trying to make himself look like a good dharma practitioner, so he grabs handfuls of ash from the fireplace and throws them on the altar and around the cave. He recognises that *"I am the kind of dharma practitioner that I am, and whether the sponsor likes it or not, I am what I am."*

The demon of image, of conceit, of presentation, can catch us in all sorts of ways: about our physical appearance, about how friendly we are, about how much time and attention we give to other people and so on. We can all be hooked into a fantasy of wanting other people to validate that we are okay.

Going back to the basic fact that the mind itself is pure from the very beginning, what I call 'I, me, myself,' is the manifestation of the energy of that state. Manifestation of all and any kind has no other source than the infinite mind itself—which is not other than 'our' mind, the mind which is our source. Manifestation comes as it comes and goes as it goes. Whatever form it shows does not contradict the intrinsic purity of its own ground nor of its activity. Our sense of self, our ego, is part of this non-dual manifestation. However the ego is not the master of the field of manifestation but arises due to many causes and conditions, most of which it is unaware. This is why we often find ourselves thinking, saying and acting in ways which surprise both ourselves and others. The eight worldly dharmas⁴ lead us astray and encourage our artificiality. The desire to please everybody is inherently corrupting since the field of experience is inherently unpredictable.

At the moment there are two Karmapas. Some people like one Karmapa and some people like the other Karmapa. One Karmapa is validated by the Dalai Lama and other important lamas, but the people who follow the other Karmapa are not interested in this because they like *their* Karmapa. The point here is not to establish who is the true and who the untrue Karmapa. It is simply the fact that no one person, no matter how respected, can please all the people all the time.

No matter what kind of adaptation we make our manifestation will bring us some friends, some enemies, and most of the time no attention at all. These varying circumstances are just the interplay of the patterns of energy within which our actual agency is rather minimal. Yet if we think, *"Oh, my friends like me therefore I can like myself. Because some people love me, I must be loveable."* then this is locking the door to freedom. It is saying that I am at the

⁴ Hope for happiness and fear of suffering, hope for fame and fear of insignificance, hope for praise and fear of blame, hope for gain and fear of loss.

mercy of other people's views about me: when they like me I am happy, and when they don't like me I am sad. The ego is like a cork bobbing on the ocean, lifted up and cast down by the waves of experience. To find freedom we neither merge in, nor reject, what is arising but we stay relaxed and unmoved by whatever movements occur. The one who is moved is the ego; the one who is open, available and yet undisturbed is awareness.

This fourth demon of egotism and self-conceit refers to the self-referential quality of being absorbed in the story about oneself as being significant. It is concerned with the internal self-reflexive commentary, the on-going narrative, which creates the form of a pseudo-self which we take to be ourselves.

Perhaps you have a childhood memory of being at the seaside on holiday and just running free along the beach. When you see children in that state you see their faces shining and open. They are not evaluating how well they are playing or interacting, they are just completely present in the wholeness of experience. This is a taste of the state that is free of egotism, in which there is a simplicity, a nakedness, and a lack of complication in the full given-ness of this moment and of the next. Much of the time, however, we imagine that there is a need to evaluate how we are getting on: to set goals, to push ourselves a bit harder, to evaluate and then feel guilty and bad or to strive even more. Most people have these kinds of winds blowing across their internal landscape most of the time and these gusts of judgement lift us up and cast us down, keeping us from peace and contentment.

Machig Labdron said that this last demon contains all the others. For example, when you look at what is in my hand, the glass that you see is created by your mental activity of identification. However if you relax your mental activity there is simply the immediacy of what occurs, naked and free of your confectionary interpretations. This frees 'the glass' from the prison of our concept and lets its potential unfold. The identification that 'this is a glass' creates a solidification upon which we express our opinions and so colour the world with our preoccupations and avoidances.

It is the same with the seemingly internal contents of the mind. It is not the thoughts themselves that are the problem but rather our notion that they have something personal to do with 'me'. This is why in the meditation we spend a lot of time just sitting and allowing thoughts to come and go. Through this we start to see that the thought plus my involvement creates the ordinary sense of my experience of 'this is happening to me'. When we start to relax our belief in what is arising, relaxing our investment and involvement in it, when we no longer relate the thought to ourself, it is just a thought, a transient form of energy

Let's say a thought such as 'I hate myself' arises. Although it can be a very tempting thought if we have developed a pattern of negative identifications of our 'self', the actual thought, 'I hate myself' comes up and goes by. That's interesting. The less immediate identification we have with the thought, the more chance we have of being able to see what it is up to and what *we* might be up to in rushing to get involved with it.

The central concern in cutting free is to cut a gap, to cut off the fusion which appears to occur between open awareness and what arises in, to, and as awareness. The mind is like a mirror. We know that when we look in the mirror reflections come and go; they don't stay. When they go they don't leave any trace. Similarly when the mind is clear thoughts and all the modes of experience come and go without trace. When we *are* the experience without being

limited by it, when we are the empty non-duality of awareness and experience, what is there to say afterwards?

On a sunny day like today the children go out to play. When they come home, we ask:

- *What were you doing?*
- *Playing.*
- *Yes, but what did you do?*
- *Just playing!*

When we are playing we are just playing. What else is there to say? When we are alive, when we are present, we are just present with what is happening. When that experience ends, why would we talk about it? Yet we get drawn into commentary, binding our sense of our self and our sense of the world into a narrative that maintains our sense of being a separate individual.

Attachment to, and identification with the moment of arising as something substantial and truly existing leads us to catch the moment and to be caught by it. This is our commitment to the project of creating a substantial enduring sense of self.

A lot of effort from nothing, for nothing!