

## A Nyensa Pilgrimage, November 2012

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When the great eleventh-century Tibetan yogini Machig Labdrön was receiving empowerment from her teacher, Kyoton Sonam Lama, at the key moment in the initiation when the wisdom beings descend, Machig magically rose up from where she was sitting. She was suspended in the air and in a state of profound meditation and danced the twenty-four dances of the peaceful dakinis and started teaching in Sanskrit. She passed through the wall of the temple, and flew into a tree above a small pond.

This pond was the residence of a powerful *naga*, or water spirit. These capricious, mythic beings can cause disruption and disease, and can also act as treasure holders or protectors. This particular *naga* was so terrifying that the local people did not even dare to look at this pond, never mind approach the tree. But Machig landed in the tree above the pond and stayed there in a state of profound unshakable meditation.

Young Machig's arrival in this lone tree above the pond was a direct confrontation for the water spirit who was angry and a little frightened. He approached her threateningly, but she remained in meditation, unafraid. This infuriated him, so he gathered a huge army of *nagas* from the region in an attempt to intimidate her. They approached her as a mass of terrifying magical apparitions. When she saw them coming, Machig instantly transformed her body into a food offering, and as her biography states: "They could not devour her because she was egoless."

Not only did the aggression of the *nagas* evaporate, but also they developed faith in her and they offered her their "life essence" committing not to harm other beings and vowing to protect her and always serve her. Through meeting this demonic attack without fear and offering her body as food with unshakable compassion rather than fighting against them, Machig turned the demon into an ally. This experience along with her practice and study of Prajnaparamita formed the base of her Chöd teachings.

The *nyensa* pilgrimage in the Chöd lineage is done in this spirit. The practitioner goes to places that are frightening, lonely or sacred. And stirs up the gods and demons (*lhadre*) there with the practice of the Chöd and then makes the body offering, letting go of all levels of grasping.

I had a chance to do this pilgrimage in India, Sikkim and Nepal in November of 2012, just after the Chöd Empowerment from His Holiness Karmapa held at Dorzang Rinpoche's monastery in Kangra Valle. I tried to choose special places that would actually be scary in order to provoke the *long tse*, *long* means eruption

or upheaval, *tse* means measure or state my favorite translation of *longtse* is 'critical eruptions.' Sometimes I got more than I bargained for.

I traveled from Gangtok to south Sikkim to Khandro Sang Phuk 'Secret Cave of the Dakinis' along terrifying narrow mountain roads. It is a hot springs with divine healing water in a turquoise river with huge amber yellow boulders that seem to have been tossed into it from the bank above. I arrived with a headache, my neck out, and body chilled from a damp ground floor room in Gangtok. This is the southern cave of the four sacred caves that surround Tashi Ding, the center of the Sikkimese mandala, a mountain topped with many stupas and temples. The Khandro Sang Phuk, sacred to Guru Rinpoche, is in the mountain cliff that rises above the river where the hot springs emerge.

To enter the cave I had to duck under a rock overhang and then go up some stairs to the outer cave, which is open to the sky, a powerful place to practice but not the real Secret Cave of the Dakini. At the back is the low entrance that leads to the Secret Cave of the Dakinis. Arriving in late afternoon I decided to stay the night in the cave. I knew if I didn't do it



The turquoise river at Khandro Sang Phuk, the Secret Cave of the Dakini, southern cave in the Sikkimese cave mandala.

Photo: T. Allione

butter lamp splattered and flickered eating what little oxygen there was. The incense smelled like the tuberose, the essential oil I had put on my daughter Chiara's body after she died in 1980. Her death from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) came rushing back with the grief of losing her followed by the grief of my husband David's recent death. The fear of rats and the bats that began flying inches from my head, the heat, the claustrophobia, the tightness of the cave, along with awareness of Sikkim's recent earthquake were almost too intense to bear. I had entered another *nyensa* 'dif-

can sweat lodge. I sat up again. I thought I could not handle anymore. Something broke open, and I saw what I was doing. It was all concepts that I was creating: the fear, the claustrophobia, the pressure of it all, none of it was real and suddenly it was as though the tightness of the cave relaxed its grip, shifted. I had been like a bee buzzing against the window so furiously it could kill itself with stress trying to be free, when the open door was a few inches away. I stopped buzzing and flew. I felt like I could put my hand right through the rock wall. With this openness was the presence of Guru Rinpoche, warm and gentle. Never had I felt him so personally present, so kind. The unstained absolute state was *right there* as soon as I stopped struggling.

There is a Chöd word, *dulzhug*, which is usually translated as 'vanquishing conduct' or 'yogic conduct' and it is *dulzhug* that you practice on the *nyensa* pilgrimage, pushing through difficulty. The direct confrontation with the ego due to the scary uncomfortable situations push through into an experience of liberation as intense as the energy of clinging and fear.

Again bat flew so close I could feel the air from its wings, and yet so fast I could not see it, it was dark anyway. Everything I had was covered with dirt, but I didn't have the energy to react, it didn't matter, dirty or clean, I was too exhausted to worry about it. The air was so close, no space, no oxygen. Then again the density became transparent and Guru Rinpoche was present. I did Chod again then I dozed off.

I woke at 3:30 am, at in exhaustion. I felt intense physical, mental and emotional exhaustion from the resistance to the dirt, rats, and bats. Then a strange relaxed clarity dawned. I saw the true condition is never altered by any of these 'impure' things and is always spontaneously present.

Finally it was 5:30 am and I crawled out toward the grey dawn at the mouth of the cave. Air had never smelled so delightful, crisp, clean and loaded with oxygen. Monkeys swung through the

trees above and the morning birds sang. I felt changed, reborn, something had happened in the Secret Cave of the Dakini that would stay with me, *dulzhug*. I suddenly understood why Chod practitioners must do the *nyensa* pilgrimage, this confrontation is important.

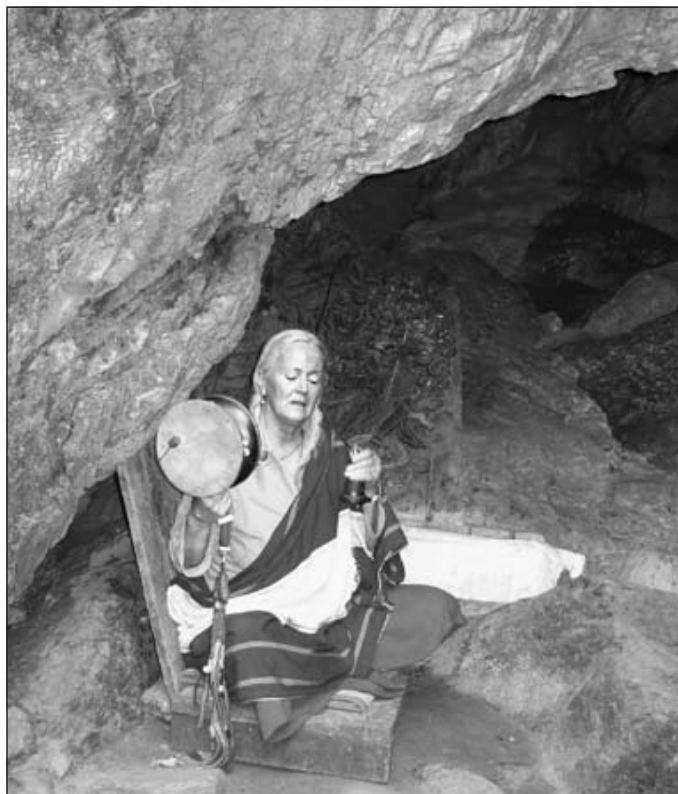
I made my way back to my 'room', a hastily constructed bamboo structure with bamboo woven walls, and a dirt floor with three stones in the corner for a cooking fire. I changed and climbed in semi darkness down toward the racing river and the hot springs. Everything in my body ached. Cement bags filled with sand and sewn closed created the barrier between the river and the hot springs, it was mostly warm and was only hot under two overhanging rocks.

My friend Shanti came in to join me and we stayed under the rocks. She massaged my aching legs, the divine water and her gentle massage took the ache away. A Bhutanese girl joined us and showed us how to rub the rock above our heads with a harder rock and a substance like clay came off which she promised would remove all our wrinkles.

Shanti brought me a thermos cup with hot chai from the little makeshift restaurant set up in one of the bamboo houses that washed away every year during monsoon. The steamy liquid loaded with raw sugar and fresh milk tasted like the most delicious nectar, and took away the fatigue and the mineral water did the rest.

After a few hours I got out, splashed cold water from the river on my body and shivered into my 'room'. I hung my towel outside in the sun that had just made it down to the river over the steep banks, turning the steep slope golden yellow. Then since I was no longer tired, I swung my practice bag over my shoulder and headed down the river to practice Chöd on the small beach next to the roaring glacial river, not knowing what I would meet in the next 'sensitive area'.

For further information on Tsultrim Allione's work and teaching schedule: see [www.taramandala.org](http://www.taramandala.org)



Tsultrim Allione at the mouth of Khandro Sang Phuk, Secret Cave of the Dakini (see entrance to the smaller cave behind) South Sikkim November 2012. Photo: Shanti Loustanou

that first night I never would.

To enter the inner cave I passed through a yoni shaped passage and crawled the rest of the way, finally emerging into the small inner cave, from where you cannot see the entrance. It felt like a very dark tight womb. I sat on my sleeping bag and decided to do Chöd off and on all during the night, I could touch all the walls sitting in the middle.

The cave was hot with little oxygen and the pilgrims had been burning Indian incense all day, a

difficult place', what His Holiness Karmapa called jokingly a 'sensitive area.' I took out my drum, bell and kangling (thighbone trumpet) and began the Pharchangma Chod from Dzinpa Rangdrol working with all the emotions that were arising intensely.

Afterwards I sat quietly for a while. Then fatigue swept over me and I tried to sleep, but could not, it was too hot, I was too scared of rats nibbling my fingers, and it was too hard to breathe. It was like an endless Native Ameri-