

My Kind Father and the Wooden Bowl

Today I wanted to write in my blog about the wonderful father who gave me birth, in connection with my brown bowls. Whenever you come into my kitchen you will see many reddish brown wooden bowls of different sizes.

They are bowls that I have bought in India, Nepal, and other places, in memory of my kind father, now departed. Why is this? My deceased father's bowl was a wooden one.

His name was Bobo Tashi. Although most Tibetan names express some fine, profound meaning, even I don't really know why my father's first name was Bobo. If I were to guess, I'd wonder if it might not have been a name of endearment that his mother gave to him. His last name, Tashi, 'Auspicious,' gives the sense of goodness, virtue, and the like.

He would use a dark brown wooden bowl. Whenever he ate or drank anything he would always use that wooden bowl. In my mind's eye I can still see it clearly, along with his smiling face and long whiskers. These days, the basis by which people remember their loved ones are photos, but in those days you couldn't find a camera in Tibet. So I keep a wooden bowl as a substitute.

My father was the kindest person to me in my life. He was not only my father, he was also a mother to me. I was only three months old when my kind mother and an uncle and other members of my family died of starvation under the oppression and torture of the Communist Chinese government. My father was young at the time. I later understood, from what people said, that many of the country folk had urged him to remarry, but he wouldn't listen to them. There is a custom in Tibet not to remarry, out of respect for your deceased spouse, and in the belief that a step-parent would not treat children of your previous spouse as well as they would treat their own. In any case, he didn't remarry.

It was thanks to my father surviving and taking care of us that my siblings and I did not die of starvation and are still alive in the world today; it is solely due to his kindness. To think of the situation in Tibet of those times makes your heart shudder in terror. For many years after 1959, so many people died of starvation due to famine and other conditions. When you consider the situation of Tibet during those times it is an amazing wonder that my single father, without the help of a wife, was able to care for us and keep my siblings and I from starving to death during those terrible, critical decades. My father, himself, was imprisoned for nine years. Not only in this lifetime, it is impossible for me to ever forget his kindness in all of my lives.

Furthermore, my kind father was my first great Teacher of Dharma, who was of most benefit to me. Because he could read Tibetan well, he taught me how to read. I was about six at the time; I still remember it. After he had made some barely adequate food for my brothers, sister and I, he would orally teach us the Praises of Tara, the Clearance of Obstacles and the Spontaneous Fulfillment Prayers of Guru Rinpoche; the Sukhavati Prayer, and others. He also told us stories about Buddha's previous lives and the life of Milarepa. I have not forgotten the things he taught us then. At that time there was hardly a monastery, lama, or monk to be seen in Tibet. If the Chinese

government came to know we were practicing Dharma we would pay with our lives or be sent to prison. If we lit a lamp in offering, we had to first make sure that the door and all the windows were completely covered. If Chinese agents saw it from outside, the next day they would beat and kick us in the middle of a public gathering; tortures beyond imagination. So we had to be extremely careful.

Because my father was a good Dharma practitioner he had a great deal of prayer recitation, meditation, and so forth, to do. When things lightened up slightly after the death of Mao Tse Tung, my father entered the path of Dharma; he took the vows of a lay practitioner. He was never without his prayer wheel and prayer beads in his hands.

Unfortunately, at the age of 85 he got a stomach disease. I served and nursed him well, day and night, for a month. There was a small hospital in the village, so I was about to take him there when he said, 'I don't want to die in the hospital. I want to die in your lap. Please don't take me to the hospital.' Since he said he didn't want to die in a hospital we didn't go. I was always at his side, spoke with gentleness, and gave him the loving care and nursing that is needed by the sick and elderly. In addition, I had already been named abbot of the monastery, and everyone was placing great confidence in me, which he had seen with his own eyes. His ultimate wish had been that I would be a good monk, and since his dying wish had been fulfilled, he was very happy. He kept saying over and over, 'Now, even if I die, I am at peace. I don't have the slightest regret' I took care of my father like a mother cares for her children, putting his head in my lap and feeding him food and water. One day, with my brothers and sister, as we sat in a circle around him, he laid his head in my lap. As we talked, his breath became shorter and shorter, and as he looked into my face, smiling, his breathing ceased.

In Tibet, the custom was that, when parents died, their body would be kept at home for forty-nine days as funerary services were performed. Following that custom, I kept my father's body at home for forty-nine days, each week inviting lamas to perform phowa – transference of consciousness – and neighbors and others would come to join in saying prayers. Because Tibet is at high altitude, bodies of the deceased do not deteriorate and smell, like in warmer more humid climates. Finally, we took his body to the cemetery and performed sky-burial. This was in 1996, before I came to India as a refugee.

Thus, my benevolent father showed great kindness to my siblings and I. He was especially loving towards me. I think it was because I was the youngest of four siblings, two older brothers and one sister. My oldest brother is a Gelugpa lama. My older brothers were sometimes a little envious of me because our father loved me the most. Sometimes my uncle would say to my father, 'You spoil your youngest son.' I remember him often scolding my father for this. I was angry at my uncle when he did this, but I never dared show my displeasure, because he was a very stern, strict person.

In short, a wooden bowl is the best basis I have for remembering my father. I bought this particular bowl in Dharmasala, India in 2002. It is just like the one my father used in shape, color, and size. He loved eating the Tibetan foods of tsampa and, especially, nettle soup! I still remember my siblings and I sitting around him in the sun, eating 'pag'-balls of tsampa- mixed with nettle soup. I keep this wooden bowl as a way

of never forgetting him. Whenever I miss my father I eat tsampa and nettle soup in my wooden bowl, sitting in the sun, like he used to do. It gives me the feeling that he is sitting right beside me.

These days some young people, when they become self-sufficient and make new friends, they completely forget about their kind parents. When their parents get old they never even go back to see them. I have seen this very sad situation with my own eyes. This might just be a custom or culture of a country, but no matter how your parents treated you, because it was your karma to have them as your parents who gave you this life, I think it is a big mistake to just say, 'My parents didn't treat me well,' and to only think of them as terrible people. To respect, serve, and look after your parents is not just Buddhadharmā; it is an upstanding, noble way of being from any perspective. Plus, if you don't treat your parents well, when you have children of your own, the likely result of that karma ripening will be that they become a big problem for you, and cause you a lot of irritation and annoyance!

Please, everyone, lovingly care for your parents!

Karmically ordained kind father, it has been
Twenty-two years since you left for the Buddhāfields.
This brown wooden bowl by which I remember you
Is testimony that I will never forget you, great father!

You were my father as well as my mother;
You were also my Teacher and Master.
You are everything to me;
Your kindness is vast, dear holy father.

My being here today and being a kind person
Is all due to your benevolence.
My being alive in this world and all the good
That I accomplish is due to your kindness.

In order to repay your kindness, your son promises
To fulfill your deepest, innermost wishes:
To make my life meaningful and to powerfully benefit others;
I will never give this up until it is accomplished.

On this world-wide Mother's Day holiday,
I remember this wonderful person, my father,
By means my brown wooden bowl, and Tibetan food
Celebrating in memory of you, never forgetting.

By power of the profound loving bond between father and son,
And my life-long perseverance in the practice of holy Dharma,
I pray that we, father and son, will meet in future lives
In Buddha Amitabha's Pure Land of Bliss, Sukhavati.

At a half-way point in his life, this orphan who wanders to the ends of the earth, Khenpo Karten, promises that, from this Mother's Day onwards, I will always celebrate the memory of my father every Mother's Day. With memories of my kind father welling up within me, I offer this on my blog of Mother's Day, May 13th, 2018.

English translation by Jampa Tharchin