



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

Benefits of the smoke offering

1) The history of smoke offering

The smoke offering ceremony has been widely practiced in Tibet since ancient times in three different, successive lineages. The first lineage was indigenous to Tibet and had no connection to the Bön or Buddhist tradition. This type of smoke offering included animal sacrifice, but with the rise of Bön religion this changed. Smoke offering was incorporated in the rituals, abandoning the animal sacrifice and starting the second lineage. The third lineage began with the great Lopön, Guru Rinpoche, who came to Tibet and performed the smoke offering according to the Buddhist teachings. This is the way we still practice it today.

The first and most important Buddhist university in the Tibetan history is Samye. King Tritsong Deutsen encountered many difficulties during building it. So Guru Rinpoche performed a smoke offering called *Gya ngön*, which pacified all obstacles and negative influences. Afterwards, the king was able to accomplish all his plans with regards to Buddhism swiftly without encountering any obstacles. From this time on until today we celebrate *Dzam Ling Chi Sang* (Universal Smoke Offering) every year on the 15th day of the 5th Tibetan month. Therefore the tradition is still very much alive now.

The next point concerns whether there were also smoke offering rituals in India, where Buddhism originates from. Probably there wasn't such a tradition. Wherever Buddhism spreads, it adapts to the local culture and traditions, which again are influenced by the weather, living conditions, landscape etc. So Guru Rinpoche used the existing smoke offering ritual in Tibet and combined it with the Buddhist practice.

2) The meaning of the smoke offering ritual

In Tibetan, the term smoke offering is made up of two words, *sang* and *chö*. *Sang* means to purify, and what needs to be purified are the results of our actions, committed though unwholesome states of mind, as well as the pollution in our environment, which affects our physical health, and our relationship with the local deities, in case that we have harmed them.

The second word *chö* has the meaning of offering. The way we perform this is by putting the purifying substances in the fire and offering the smell of the smoke which ensues. One of the substances, for example, is incense, which is also part of the seven offerings we put on an altar. The text we recite during the ritual has the meaning that I have just explained.

The smoke offering within the Buddhist context belongs in its essence to the paramita of generosity as described in the sutras and tantras. This includes that offering is made in a mental state which is free of any expectations as to what we will get in return in relation to what we give. The main points are to offer to the deities and to be generous towards other beings.

In Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan, and in the West like in America and Europe, this ceremony is called smoke offering. That is fine, but it misses the purifying aspect, if we just say smoke. We do purify through the smoke, but this is not clearly expressed, so I believe that if we can include purification in the title, it would be more appropriate.

3) How to practice smoke offering

We arise as the meditational deity described in the text. Here it is Guru Rinpoche. It is important that we have received the Guru Rinpoche empowerment beforehand, because we need his blessing and strength to visualize ourselves as him and undertake the actions of purifying and offering. If we do not have the empowerment, we should try to receive it in future, but in the meantime we simply refrain from this visualization and stay in our normal form.

Whether we stay in our normal form or whether we visualize ourselves as the deity, we start burning the offering substances. They should be free of any kind of poisonous materials like plastic or paper as it is said in the ritual texts. Also if we consider the environment, we should not burn anything that pollutes it. We need to be as careful as possible about this, because the intention is to purify through a clean smell. What we can use are for example local substances derived from trees or fruit and buy as much as possible according to our financial means. That is what we call the actual offering.

This actual offering then needs to be blessed through mantra, meditative absorption and wholesome intention, turning it into an offering manifested by the mind. For example if we only have the offering items here in front on the table, then through the mantra, meditative absorption and wholesome intention they are blessed in a two-fold way. One is that they become an offering cloud as vast as space and secondly that they become inexhaustible. So it is not that we offer today and then everything is gone, but it is so immeasurably vast, that it can never depleted. That is an offering manifested through the mind.

The recipients of the offering are the lamas, the meditational deities, the khandros, the dharma protectors and so on. The recipients of our generosity are all the beings who wander in the six realms of cyclic existence due to the influence of their negative mind states. They

receive whatever they need through these offering clouds. For example, beings who are thirsty receive water, beings who need clothes get clothes. We should especially visualize the ones that we have karmic debts to and imagine that these debts are cleared through our generosity. This way of practicing smoke offering is described clearly in the corresponding texts.

4) Benefits of smoke offering

Through the purifying aspect of the ritual, the elements in our body, which have decreased in strength are replenished. If the elements in our body are weak, we cannot withstand the strength of the elements in the outer world, as these two are out of balance. As a result, we can get sick and outer influences like spirits and demons can harm us. Of course, the mind is more powerful than the body, but our body does have certain strengths and capabilities. So when the channels, energy and essence drops in our body are purified, our overall physical health naturally increases and we are not so susceptible to external influences like spirits and demons.

The benefits of the offering aspect include the following. By offering to the lama, we receive his blessing. By offering to the meditational deity we receive the temporary and the ultimate spiritual attainments (siddhis). By offering to the khandros our positive actions will encounter no hindrances. By offering to the Dharma protectors, we will receive their help in our worldly and dharmic endeavours.

Dharma House, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 2012

*Translated from Tibetan by Daniela Hartmann
Edited by Zuzi Griffiths*