

IS IT KARMA?

Pad ma rgya mtsho

Pad ma rgya mtsho (b. 1988) is from Wuzong Village, Darto (Nanduo) Township, Garzi (Ganzi) County, Garzi (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan (Sichuan Province). He says, "I wrote this story based on what I heard from neighboring villagers."

Drolma was awakened by a threatening nightmare and couldn't return to sleep, though the outside was still blanketed in inky darkness. She finally sighed, got up, and pulled on tattered, smelly clothes. Her decrepitude only allowed her to toddle to the door, instinctively knowing she had to prepare breakfast. She made her way to the disordered kitchen where mice announced their presence through periodic squeaks and rustlings.

She started a fire. Flames reflected on her bleak face revealing rivers of wrinkles on a reddened forehead. She tranquilly sat, chanted scriptures, and spun her prayer wheel, recalling the past. Tears streamed from her shiny eyes.

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After her husband's death, she lived with her only son, Dawa, a short, heavy-set man. His long black hair hung down to his wide shoulders. He sometimes wrapped it around his head with a red strip of cloth. Large, lustrous eyes shone under his thick eyebrows. His sharp nose suddenly appeared like a hill if he were viewed from some distance away.

Dawa particularly liked wearing a Tibetan knife that he felt made him a real man, confident and brave, however,

when he chatted with others, the lasting impression was of a friendly temperament.

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When Drolma returned from laboring in their fields, she was so exhausted that if she had been struck with even a pebble, she would have collapsed. She glanced around and saw nothing but the messy room, which created more discomfort. Suddenly her son appeared, giving her confidence, encouragement, and hope that life might be better.

Dawa was mischievous and loved to draw. When they visited monasteries, he gazed at *thangka* and frescos while others prostrated and circumambulated. Time seemed to stand still as he was utterly mesmerized by the colorful lines on the walls.

Dawa noticed his exhausted mother's return, put down his favorite drawing, rushed out of the room, and helped her scatter the weeds to dry that she had carried home to later use as fuel.

"Mother, a bowl of tea or a bowl of yogurt?" asked Dawa. She marched to a seat by the adobe stove, removed her muddy old shoes, and hesitantly replied, "Bring me a bowl of tea. I'm dying of thirst."

After serving a bowl of tea, he said, "I'll fetch water. Mother, you rest."

Although Dawa had never been to school, he could read some Tibetan and loved to write Tibetan on his completed drawings. When Drolma thought about their poverty, and her inability to send him to school, her bright eyes filled with tears. Neighbors admired Drolma for having such an intelligent, understanding son.

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Very early one winter morning some years later, the weak shining sun began rising in the distance. Drolma had waited

for her son to return from the county town throughout the frigid night. Cold and fatigue combined, clouding her vision. She murmured and decided to return to bed. At that moment, the sound of someone knocking on the small wood door was audible. She cautiously opened the door in fear it would fall off its old hinges if pushed forcefully. She was dumbfounded when she saw a strange woman with her son. She reluctantly invited them inside and sat, saying nothing.

The room was as quiet and silent as the room was empty of anything of value. Dawa dared not look at his mother but eventually managed, "Ama, this is Derji."

Drolma only coughed in response. She was extremely disappointed that he had found such a woman. Her curled blonde hair, reddened lips, and the clickety-clack of her high-heeled shoes were unfathomable. She summoned all her strength to control the situation but failed. Derji's sensuality had obviously attracted Dawa's attention and desire.

Dawa strode to his mother, stood silently for a few seconds, then quavered, "Ama, I want to marry her and bring her here to live. We promise we will help this family and Derji will assist you doing the chores."

Derji silently nodded.

Drolma contemplated for a moment, took Dawa aside, and said, "Dawa, she lives in the county town in better conditions than we have. There's a big gap between you two. You live in two totally different worlds. You have little in common. I am trying to help you avoid difficulties. This is against our traditions. We have no property of value."

He determinedly said, "I know, but she wants to live with me. She knows our circumstances. She understands this and doesn't care what we've got."

Realizing such firm resolve could not be altered and that she must accept this reality, she grudgingly asked, "When do you want to celebrate the wedding?"

Without hesitation he replied, "As soon as possible."

Dawa consulted a diviner for an auspicious date and then he and his mother made the needed preparations. The wedding was attended by relatives and friends who offered congratulations.

Drolma's life was one of great misery after Derji moved in. Derji did not obey her and Dawa always took Derji's side.

One day, the couple left, not intending to return until evening, leaving Drolma alone. She did the chores industriously as usual, sweeping each room and inspecting it to see if any dirty spots remained. When the sun started to set, she sensibly prepared dinner. Although she did everything impeccably, Derji began berating Drolma the moment they stepped through the door for being irresponsible.

Drolma wanted to talk with Dawa alone, but she was afraid of being ignored. She gave up, and continued working.

After more bitter years, Drolma had a grandson and a granddaughter whom she loved with all her heart and took very good care of. Nevertheless, Derji continued scolding and insulting her mother-in-law.

"Leave my children alone, or you'll profane them!" said Derji, one day as Drolma was teaching them how to tie their shoelaces.

"Old woman! Get far away from my children!" said Derji, her eyes shifting, not looking at Drolma.

Drolma continued helping the children and pitied them for having such terrible parents. She worried about the children's future.

"Ama, leave our bedroom. Look at your muddy shoes. They'll ruin the carpet!" said Dawa a few days later. Drolma couldn't believe her ears. She consoled herself that it hadn't really been said.

Dawa said it again.

Drolma was so shocked that she stood stiff as a statue. Life, suddenly, had become hardly worth living.

Dawa was unaware and, in general, uncaring about how much he had hurt his mother.

A few minutes later as thunder boomed and lightening came in long sharp shards in the streaming dark sky, Drolma's mind brimmed with sorrow. Suicide? Resistance? Her grandchildren appeared in her chaotic mind and she soliloquized, "Is it really karma? Is it true that you receive what you give?"

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Years passed. When her grandchildren assumed some of the family responsibility, Dawa stole a motorcycle with his friends. The police investigated, arrested Dawa and his friends, and incarcerated Dawa.

Derji became more assertive and cruel.

Although Drolma suffered more than before, she lived for her son's return.

"Please invite some monks and chant scriptures for Dawa," suggested Drolma.

"Over my corpse!" Derji barked malignantly. "We don't have even enough money for ourselves. I must pay expenses for my children. Aren't you aware of this? How can we do the impossible? Money must come from somewhere."

"He's your husband and these children's father," said Drolma, pointing to the children.

"Bitch! You find the money and do it. He's also your dear son," said Derji.

When the children witnessed this, they looked hatefully at their mother and then rushed out of the room, screaming.

Derji ordered them to return, but they ignored her. Derji fiercely looked at her mother-in-law and bawled, "Devil! You created this! You'll pay for it!"

Drolma's streaming tears rivaled the flow of the stream silently running by the village. She trudged out of the

room to the local monastery to pray. While circumambulating the monastery, she heard monks melodiously chanting, creating a sense of peace and harmony. She then visited a great lama who could foretell the future, and who had been of great help to her in past years, when she couldn't, for example, collect all her sheep at sunset and darkness fell. It was dangerous to leave livestock in remote mountains where they were easy prey for wolves and vicious, stray dogs. The lama always told her the exact location of the missing sheep. This time she asked about her incarcerated son.

The lama counted his prayer beads for some time, nodded in a satisfied manner, and pronounced, "Mother Drolma, your son is healthy. He'll be released in a couple of months."

Joy carried her away when she heard this. She gratefully thanked the lama and happily walked home. This joy was, however, short-lived once she stepped inside her home and again encountered her daughter-in-law's coarse speech.

She looked forward to seeing her son over the next weeks. Days seem like years when you desperately want something. She continued to endure her daughter-in-law's never-ending litany of abuse, remaining stoically silent.

Her neighbors and relatives understood the unjustness of her life and several families encouraged her to live with them. One late afternoon, one of her brothers came to her home and said, "Sister, why don't you leave? Come to my home."

While pouring tea for her brother, Drolma replied, "I've spent most of my life here. Our ancestors spent their lives here. I won't leave. My deathbed should be here. I'll wait for my son."

"Are you willing to continue to endure such evil maltreatment from that bitch?" her brother said impatiently.

"What else can I do? Maybe it is my karma that I must undergo it," Drolma replied thoughtfully.

"Sister, this family and even your son aren't worth such misery," her brother said.

"I understand my son. Whatever he has done, he is still my son," said Drolma as her brother headed for the door.

Drolma continued turning her prayer wheel, counting prayer beads in her left hand, and murmuring the Six Sacred Syllables.

Some days later the sky was as blue as a bottomless glacial lake. Flocks of clouds danced madly in every direction. The grassland was ornamented by richly-scented flowers and the musical chirpings of songbirds. Bees competed to see who could collect the most pollen. Butterflies proudly and confidently waved their wings, displaying their beauty on this exquisite day.

Drolma took her grandchildren to the incomparable grassland, told stories, and talked about her past. The children gave her all their attention. While playing, a neighbor came and announced, "Your son has returned."

Stunned for a moment, Drolma then collected herself and rushed through the grass. The flowers' perfume heightened her sense of delight. She seemed to dash three steps at a time and quickly caught sight of her son, who was energetically talking with neighbors. When Dawa turned his head and saw his mother, his eyes filled with tears. He embraced her tightly, as though someone was about to take her away.

"How are you Ama? How have you been?" Dawa asked. He seemed to be the old, unmarried Dawa. When he held her hands that resembled dried, gnarled roots, he realized the magnitude of her suffering.

Drolma brushed her tears away and replied, "I'm well." Something blocked her throat and she was unable to say more.

"Ama, I wasn't always a good son. I'm responsible for these tragic events. I want to be a good, filial son," said Dawa.

"Did they beat you? Did you have good food? Did you suffer?" Drolma asked.

"Ama, all was not bad. I also had plenty of time to think," replied Dawa.

Drolma looked questioningly at Dawa and felt that he had changed.

When they moved inside and the children saw their father, they jumped into his hug. Dawa told them he had imagined they'd be weak, but when he saw how healthy and strong they were he was delighted. The children told him how their grandmother had cared for them, in contrast to their mother, who cared little about them. At times, they confided, she had beaten them with a stick.

Dawa felt even more sorrow for his enduring mother.

Friends and relatives visited over the next several days, and he learned more about how his wife had mistreated his mother.

"Dawa, do you know how much your mother suffered these years?" asked an intimate friend.

Dawa could only whisper, "I understand everything."

He intensely regretted the past and now detested Derji. When he recollected how cruelly she had treated his mother, he didn't want to speak to her.

Drolma prepared noodles for dinner one sweltering summer day. She had planned to cook rice but the children had begged for noodles. When the family was about to eat, Derji demanded, "Who gave permission to cook noodles on such a hot day?"

Drolma apologized, and offered, "If you don't like them, I'll make something else for you."

"You always waste food. You never think about the effort it has taken to earn it," bristled Derji.

"Smack!" echoed in the room.

"You don't have to eat. And you certainly don't have the authority to scold my mother!" Dawa exclaimed angrily.

"You... slapped me," gasped Derji, tears running down her cheeks.

"This is a warning. If you offend my mother again, I'll expel you from this home instantly," said Dawa.

Derji quietly sobbed, got up, and went to her room.

Dawa took his mother to her room and arranged her bedding. She said nothing. When he was about to close the door, she told him to apologize.

He politely agreed. Then he ordered the children to bed. He went to Derji's room and slept without turning on the light.

The next morning, Derji stayed in her room and didn't join the family for breakfast. When Drolma wanted to call her, Dawa stopped her. She didn't come out of the room the entire day, which enraged Dawa.

That night Dawa asked. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," replied Derji.

"Why didn't you come to breakfast this morning?" Dawa said.

"I wasn't hungry and I had a headache," she said.

"Are you still upset?" Dawa said

"Not really, but I'm hurt that you slapped me," she said.

"I hope you treat my mother as you treat your mother," said Dawa.

Derji didn't reply but seemed to nod assent.

Derji changed. She got up early to prepare breakfast and did the chores Drolma had done, but it was done in a spirit of hatred.

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Several prosperous years passed. Drolma grew older and couldn't see well. But her son's good care meant she was in good health.

Dawa collected caterpillar fungus in spring and Derji did the necessary farming work.

The family seemed happy.

Unfortunately, it happened so suddenly that the reality was hard to accept—Dawa died one night without a single warning signal.

Relatives and friends came immediately when they received word. Gossip fluttered everywhere: Derji had poisoned him. He had died of an incurable disease.

Villagers helped with the funeral.

The children were anguished and cried endlessly but could only accept reality.

Drolma was visiting her brother the evil night of Dawa's death. She didn't know what had happened. Everything was in order when she returned. Derji pleaded with the villagers to keep the secret as long as possible in fear Drolma wouldn't be able to bear it. Even the grandchildren kept the secret.

"Where has Dawa gone?" asked Drolma.

"He went far away to work," replied Derji.

The answer was exactly the same each time she asked, just like a strip of cloth wrapped around her eyes.

Time passed. Dawa's death remained a mystery.

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She heard something. The tea was boiling. She put her prayer wheel aside, took the kettle from the fire, and had a very simple breakfast.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Ama ཡ་མ།

Dawa ལྷ་བ།

Derji བདེ་རྒྱེད།

Drolma ལྷོ་ལ་མ།

Garzi དཀར་མཛོལ། 甘孜

Garzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture དཀར་མཛོལ་བོད་
རིགས་རང་སྐྱོང་ཁུལ། 甘孜藏族自治州

lama ལྷ་མ།

Nanduo མདའ་མདོ། 南多

Pad ma rgya mtsho བད་མ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

Sichuan སི་ཁྲོན། 四川

thangka ཐང་ག།

Wuzong འོང་བཟང། 吾绒