Mother’s Grief

People all around the world walk around objects, temples, mountains or lakes that are sacred to them. It is an ancient way of showing respect to the Creator. In the Tibetan language, such a walk around a great stupa, statue, lake or mountain is called a kora.

Kang Rinpoche, the holy mountain in the Ngari region of the Tibet Autonomous Region, has been a sacred site for far longer than anybody remembers. Pilgrims of many faiths travel there to perform koras around the mountain, which is also known as Kailas or Meru. The mountain is respected in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Bönpo, and pilgrims from many other religious traditions visit. The Bön walk the kora in the anti-clockwise direction while others do it clockwise. Buddhists believe that performing 13 koras around Kang Rinpoche brings most merit. How did this come about?

In the Kham region of Tibet, far to the east of Ngari, lived a devout woman who gave birth to a son and was overcome with the desire to earn religious merit. ‘Everybody says that the greatest merit comes from performing a kora around Kang Rinpoche. I will take my son with me, so that we will both gain merit and the kindness of the gods,’ she thought.

After saying goodbye to her family and friends, she walked for many months with her young son. They had to
Folk Gods
cross dry, cold deserts and vast grasslands where wild donkeys ran in herds. Flocks of black-necked cranes crossed the skies and deer darted through the knee-high grass of the marshes. On some days they met many pilgrims on the road, smiling and silently reciting their mantras. The Bön recited \textit{Om Ma Tri Mu Ye Sa Le Du}; the Buddhists recited \textit{Om Mani Padme Hum}; the ascetic Hindus from the south of the Himalayas recited \textit{Om Namoh Shivaaya}. On some days the mother and baby boy met nobody but wild dogs scurrying across the plains.

After many months, the mother and son finally reached Kang Rinpoche. The mother tied her son securely to her back with a shawl and started her \textit{kora}. As she climbed the mountain, she felt hunger and thirst; but she knew that the Drolma Pass was the highest place on the \textit{kora}, and that it would be easier to breathe on the other side of the mountain.

She chanted \textit{Om Mani Padme Hum} with each breath, hugged her son close to her body, and climbed. She finally climbed to Drolma Pass and offered her prayer of thanks. She felt very thirsty. But there was no water to drink, and the thin snow around her was covered in trampled mud. She saw a few small ponds about fifty meters below the path.

The mother knew that these were the bathing pools of a \textit{dakini}, a goddess who can be very kind to good people and very angry towards bad people. The Hindus call these ponds the bathing pool of Gauri, who is the wife of the great god Shiva. In Tibet the \textit{dakini} is known as Khadroma. The thirsty pilgrim knew that the \textit{dakini} didn’t like it when someone disturbed her home. But unable to bear her thirst anymore, the mother climbed down to a pool.

She was so thirsty that she hurriedly bent down to drink water. Her baby boy slipped off her back and fell into the ice-cold water of the pond.
‘No, no, no, no, no!’ she shouted. She tried desperately to pull him out, but the cold water instantly killed the baby.

The mother was heartbroken. She clawed at her own face and beat her chest. She threw dirt into her hair and cried and begged the gods to make her son live again. But the gods didn’t bring the child back to life. She hugged her son close to her chest, but the beats of her heart didn’t make his heart beat again. Hot drops of her tears fell on the baby’s face, but it didn’t bring warmth to his body.

She had walked all the way to Kang Rinpoche to earn merit. But one moment’s carelessness had taken away everything that was dear to her. Who can imagine guilt greater than that of a mother who has caused the death of her own baby?

The mother mourned and cried throughout the night. In the morning, when her eyes had run dry of tears and her throat hurt from crying, she felt her grief decrease a little. She realized that she needed to continue her kora to pay for her sin. ‘O, Kang Rinpoche! I pray to you to forgive my sin and lift this unbearable grief away from me. I shall walk around you until I see signs that I have been forgiven. Only complete forgiveness or death can set me free,’ she said to the mountain.

She set out to perform as many koras as were needed to set her heart free. She walked past pilgrims who measured the entire length of the fifty-two kilometer path with their bodies, saying prayers all the while. She walked past long-haired ascetics praying and performing yoga in caves. She asked nobody for food or drink. Every time she climbed up to the Drolma Pass, she looked with longing at the pond where she had lost her child.

She finished seven, ten, twelve koras, but the grief and guilt stayed. Still, she walked around the sacred mountain.
On the thirteenth *kora*, she became very tired. Unable to take another step forward or keep her eyes open, she lay down on a rock to take a short nap.

When she awoke, she saw that her body, hands, and feet had left deep dents on the rock where she had slept. She understood that Kang Rinpoche had forgiven her and taken away the guilt and grief from her. The marks on the rock were proof of that. She thanked the mountain and made her long walk back to her village in Amdo where she started her life anew.

Pilgrims who go to Kang Rinpoche can still see the marks left behind by the mother who lost her child and performed thirteen *koras* around the sacred mountain. Ever since, Buddhists believe that performing thirteen *koras* will bring great merit to the pilgrim.