The Hungry Ogre

So long ago in the past that only in stories can we imagine the time, the people of Barkhyang, Nyiondrang and Drangshod in Humla of Nepal lived in terror of an ogre called Shabdag. He haunted the forests around the meadow called the Mi Sol Sa, or the human-sacrifice site.

The ogre had magical powers and a great greed for the suffering of people because he thought that was the true nature of the world. He filled homes with the cries of fatherless children and childless mothers. He stopped the rains and forced the villagers to beg him for water during the season to sow new seeds. He destroyed crops by bringing hailstorms when the ears of the uwa wheat ripened. He broke the legs of yaks and sheep, or worse, he made them disappear. A sheep that dies in an accident can be fleeced and butchered, but a sheep that is lost is truly a heartbreaking loss.

Therefore, to keep Shabdag happy, the villagers brought an eight-year-old boy each year to the meadow and left him to be eaten by Shabdag. Then they hurried to their homes to hide in fear. Shabdag ate first the feet, then the legs, the fingers, palms, arms and the stomach of the boy. The villagers tried not to listen to the crunch of bones and the tearing of flesh. Shabdag chewed off the boy’s ears before sucking out his eyes one by one. But only after he slurped
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and swallowed the boy’s screams did everything became quiet, then the villagers felt a heavy guilt oppress them.

After a thousand years of this terror, or maybe even a thousand such thousand years, the sage Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rinpoche, found himself in Barkhang. He carried his phurva dagger with which he had destroyed ignorance and expelled darkness from many other settlements on his journey towards Tibet. The enlightened mystic had already seen himself in Barkhang in an earlier vision, standing exactly at the spot where he stood now. He knew what would happen in the next moment, and in the next hour and the next day. So he let the question form itself and be expressed through him:

‘Grandma! I am thirsty. May I have water?’

From inside the house came an old grandmother’s feeble reply, ‘Grandson! Pour yourself some water from the chuzum bucket by the door. My human shape has been taken away by an ogre, and I am too ashamed to show myself to anybody.’

But Padmasambhava had also seen this in his vision, so he smiled and said gently, ‘No matter, grandma! Let me come inside and see if I can help.’ And, although the old grandmother protested, the mystic convinced her to invite him inside.

In the gloom of the house the grandmother lay on a sheepskin rug by a hearth that had gone cold. Her hair was long and matted and alive, like a coil of serpents. When Padmasambhava looked closely, he saw that the hair belonged to another creature. The hair strangled the grandmother, and swept away into the darkness. Padmasambhava caught hold of one strand of hair and started rolling it into a ball.

Or, at that very moment, Padmasambhava was standing in a dozen different houses in the three villages of Barkhyang, Nyiondrang and Drangshod, and from each
house he was rolling the magical hair that strangled people and took away their human forms. Following the hair from each house, Padmasambhava crossed rivers and climbed over cliffs, scraped his shins on thorny scrubs and flew over deep gorges. He saw the ground shake subtly with deep snores and followed the sound to finally reach Lungphung, a small valley in the inner mountains where he saw the giant ogre Shabdag. He lay on a large mat of his own coiled and matted hair, and he slept under a blanket of his own coiled and matted hair, and dreamed of more blood and flesh, more screams of terror to bring him joy.

Padmasambhava leapt onto Shabdag’s head, brought down his dagger on the ogre’s head and shouted, ‘Wake up, you cursed creature! Wake up to the light!’

The force and brilliance of the dagger made Shabdag jump up in anger. He opened his jaws wide and swallowed Padmasambhava.

Padmasambhava tore through Shabdag’s stomach and climbed to his chest where a heart as large as two fighting bulls was beating angrily. He grabbed the heart and twisted it. Shabdag breathed through a pair of lungs larger than a monastery with three hundred students. Padmasambhava first squeezed one lung, then the other. He twisted the kidneys and spleen, the blameless liver and the hungry intestines.

Shabdag roared in pain. He knelt and drank first a stream, then a lake, and then a large river to take away the pain. But Padmasambhava kept jabbing at the ogre’s organs with his dagger. Shabdag desperately scratched at a high meadow, making the mountainside crumble. Boulders and rocks rained into the valley below. He tried to crunch Padmasambhava in his belly. He writhed in pain and destroyed a forest. But the mystic in his stomach only laughed louder and louder.
Shabdag swallowed a forest of pines to knock Padmasambhava unconscious, and he swallowed large boulders to crush his enemy. Padmasambhava arranged the boulders into a stove and lit pine logs to build a large fire.

‘Who are you?’ Shabdag roared. ‘What do you want?’

‘I am Padmasambhava, the bringer of light and expeller of darkness. I will take your pain away if you promise to stop eating innocent children and stop troubling the people of these villages.’

‘No, no, no!’ Shabdag whined. ‘This is my land, and these are our traditions. I am nothing without the offerings and terrified praises from my people.’

‘Let them offer you milk instead of blood, and grains instead of flesh. Let them live with compassion and respect for you instead of fear,’ Padmasambhava said. Defeated and suffering unimaginable pain, Shabdag finally agreed. Padmasambhava flew out from his mouth and healed him from the inside, so that the pain disappeared. The hair that had strangled the villagers and kept them enslaved also disappeared and the villagers were liberated.

‘I promise to never bring suffering to my people and forever protect them, their children and cattle, and their crops,’ Shabdag promised.

In exchange, Padmasambhava blessed him, ‘Bring rain to end droughts, bless the fields with plentiful harvests, and grant children to the childless. Live as the protector of these lands!’

In this manner, the ferocious ogre Shabdag was tamed by the mystic Padmasambhava. Because even a demon can attain enlightenment, the Shabdag began to accept milk instead of blood and a figure of dough, called the Drangya, instead of the flesh of an eight-year-old boy. Pain and misery ended and prosperity and joy began. After many centuries,
the Shabdag – the lord of the land – was respectfully called the Zhibdag Rinpoche, the precious deity of the land where he is still worshipped and respected.