

CHAPTER 4 – AWARENESS

There wasn't much to do for a little boy living in the small village of *Dong-go drong*. There was no television, no school, no playground, and there were no children's books, no organized sports, and hardly any toys. The toys that they had were very simple handmade ones. So when the boys were not helping their families at home, or finding ways to entertain each other, they would sometimes visit other people in the village.



Little Konchog Gyaltzen often went to visit one of his relatives, who was a nun named Yeshe Zangmo. Everyone called her Ani Yep-Zang. “Ani” is how you address a Tibetan Buddhist nun. “Yep-Zang” was a shorter version of her name.

He was very fond of her, so he liked to walk to the place where the nuns lived, and drop by her room to visit.

And he had a little game he liked to play with her. Every time he came to see her, he went to her sleeping area and stuck his head under her bed.

And every time he stuck his head under her bed, Ani Yep-Zang would scold him,

“Don't! Don't put your head under my bed! It's very dirty! It's not good for you to put your head under

someone's bed.”

The more she tried to prevent him from putting his head under her bed, the more persistent he was about sticking his head under her bed and keeping it there. He loved this game. It wasn't particularly interesting to stick his head under her bed, but he was mischievous. He liked to hear her gentle scolding, and he would laugh from under the bed.

One day when he went to visit her, he had a small toy in his hand. It was probably a small homemade toy made from wood or straw.

He happily played around with it in her room. He held it in his hand and played with it on the floor, lost in his little pretend world. He moved it around the room, sometimes throwing it or hiding it behind things.

Ani Yep-Zang laughed as she watched the little boy being so amused by his toy. He seemed to really be absorbed in playing with the simple little toy.



It could have been a little toy yak. It was natural for a little Tibetan boy to love a yak.

Yaks are an important part of rural Tibetan life. They pull ploughs, to prepare fields for planting. They carry heavy loads on their backs, even on steep mountain slopes. Some people even ride them. Their fur is used to make rope, blankets, yarn, rugs, and cushions, and to make tents for the nomads, the people who wandered with their herds of yaks and other animals. Yaks provide milk, which is also made into butter, and they provide meat. Their skin can be made into leather. Their bones are used to make combs, buttons and ornaments. Even their droppings are burned for fuel and used as fertilizer for the barley, wheat and vegetable fields.

Little Konchog Gyaltzen was lost in his imaginary world, playing with the toy. He hadn't noticed her looking at him or laughing. Suddenly there was a noise outside, and he ran to look outside. But he didn't see anything interesting outside, so he stepped back in the room.

He looked around for his toy, but he didn't see it. He looked under the blankets and under the bed. It wasn't there. He couldn't remember where he left it. Where did he play with it last, just before he heard the noise? It had to be somewhere in the room. He looked around frantically, worried that he had lost it.

He called out to the nun, "Ani Yep-Zang, where is my toy?" She replied, "I don't know."

He felt frustrated that he lost his toy. He called louder, "Where is my toy? Tell me where my toy is! You know where it is! Tell me where!"

She looked at him with compassion and answered, "I don't know."

Konchog Gyaltzen glared at her. He quickly became impatient and started to tug at her maroon robe, as if he could pull her attention to the toy.

Insistently he cried, "But you do! You do! Just close your eyes and you will see it."

Ani Yep-Zang was surprised at what he said. She thought, "I don't have supernatural vision -- I can't just close my eyes and see the toy in my mind's eye. How unusual for this little boy to think I can do that. Why would he think that? But I guess I can try."

And she wanted to help him, so she closed her eyes. As soon as her eyes were closed, she clearly saw the toy underneath a rug made of fur lying beside her, and she immediately reached under the rug and gave the toy to him.

She was shocked – how did she get this power? How could she see the hidden toy with her eyes closed? She felt like she had been given a special kind of power. She looked at little Konchog Gyaltzen with wonder. He smiled up at her, and thanked her for finding his precious toy. Then

he went back to happily playing with the toy again, like nothing special had happened. Ani Yep-Zang had never had such a power before and never would have such a power again in her life.

QUESTIONS:

1. What did Konchog Gyaltzen like to do whenever he visited the nun, Ani Yep-Zang? (put his head under her bed)
2. How do you think she may have felt when he did that? (annoyed, worried he is getting dirty)
3. How did Konchog Gyaltzen lose his toy? (he looked outside when he heard some noise, and forgot where he left his toy)
4. How did Konchog Gyaltzen feel when he lost his toy? (frustrated, impatient)
5. What did he ask Ani Yep-Zang to do when he lost his toy? (close her eyes so she could see where it was)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – AWARENESS:

“There are many thoughts of ignorance such as dullness, fogginess, discouragement, laziness, depression, or irritation without reason. In particular, if we are lazy we will not accomplish anything, neither in a worldly sense nor in dharma. The supreme antidote is mindful-awareness, it will overcome all negativities. . . .If you maintain mindfulness you will know with certainty what to do and what not to do. Thus clear awareness is most important; it is your inner Buddha.” Garchen Rinpoche, *Quote 11.*

“...[M]indful awareness...is the single sufficient remedy that transforms difficulties inside and out.” Garchen Rinpoche, *Quote 8.*

“You beings lack awareness because you are unmindful, and this is the reason for your going astray. Through my prayer, may all you beings recognize your intrinsic Awareness!”
-from The Prayer of Kuntuzangpo

“Awareness is like fire – in the beginning it is like a spark, in the end a blazing fire.” Garchen Rinpoche, *Quote 5.*

When Konchog Gyaltzen was playing with his toy, do you think he was aware of what Ani Yep-Zang was doing? No. When he heard the noise and looked outside, what do you think was on his mind? The noise- what it might be. At that moment, what did he forget? What was he not aware of? Where his toy was, where he had it when he went to see what the noise was.

Are you sometimes like Konchog Gyaltzen, focusing on a toy, or on a tablet, computer or smartphone, and tuning everything else out?

It's useful to tune things out sometimes – like when you are doing homework, reading, or playing a sport. You are concentrating, so you tune other things out.

We develop a habit on focusing on what we are doing, which is good – so we can concentrate. But when we're *not* doing work, we may have a habit of focusing only on what we want, what's interesting or fun. And then we tune out everything else! Does that happen to you? What happens when you don't see anything you want to do, how do you feel? Bored? Irritated? That's because we so often focus on what is fun, what we want, and tune everything else out, that we forget how to carefully notice what is around us.

And what happens when you see something else that's more interesting than what you have? Do you sometimes go after it, and forget what you have? That is like Konchog Gyaltsen when he thought the noise outside might be more interesting than the toy he was playing with.

We are like monkeys, always looking for something fun or interesting – our desires - one after the other, and not noticing much of what else is going on around us. That's called having a "monkey mind" – a mind that's always busy and uncontrollable, always trying to get what we want - distracted by things that we want.

But if we learn to be more aware, to notice more carefully whatever there is around us, then what is around us becomes more interesting and enjoyable! For example, if your parents want you to take a walk in the forest with them but you really want to play basketball with friends instead, you might feel bored and miserable. And you might keep thinking about playing basketball with your friends. But if you were more aware of what is around you, you might notice a lizard, a snakeskin, or an interesting insect in the forest. You might notice footprints of wild animals in the mud, or mushrooms on the forest floor. You might see a hawk or bat flying overhead. You might hear rustling of leaves from a raccoon or chipmunk moving around, or hear an owl hooting.

Another example is, if you were looking at a video, and your parents tell you to turn it off. You might feel disappointed and bored. But if you were aware of what is around you, you might notice there is another person your age standing nearby who you could talk to, or a person who could use some help, and you can earn merit - create good karma, develop your compassion - by helping, or by being friendly.

Also, if we are more aware, we notice where we put things, so we don't lose them, and we might notice something dangerous around us before we get hurt.

By only focusing on what we want, or what is fun, we are like little Konchog Gyaltsen sticking his head under the bed – looking at what is silly and fun but really useless, like the darkness and dust under the bed -- and we don't notice what is around us that might be more useful.

If we learn to be more aware of our surroundings, our outer world, we can learn to be more aware of our inner world, our mind. When we're more aware of what is happening in our mind, then we can control our minds. Controlling our minds means we can get rid of unpleasant thoughts such as angry, hateful, jealous or other destructive thoughts. How do we do that? We learn to notice right away when we are having those thoughts, and then we replace them with positive thoughts. That makes us feel happier and more peaceful. By doing that more and more, we develop our awareness.

PRACTICE THIS WEEK: Close your eyes while sitting, and notice the sounds around you. Then practice mindful awareness of breathing - notice exactly how it feels in your nose when you breathe in, and out. Next, notice carefully how your stomach moves as you breathe.

ACTIVITY – Make a toy yak with oven-bake clay (for example, Sculpey clay) as a reminder of the story of Konchog Gyaltsen losing his toy yak, and the importance of being aware. Show students the photos of yaks, and instruct them to practice awareness by carefully noticing the shape of the yak’s body, head, neck (with hump), ears, horns, face, eyes, nostrils, legs and hooves, so that they can form their piece of clay into a yak.

Materials needed: Oven-bake clay (black, white, grey), wire, wire cutter, pencils, plastic sheeting or placemats, yarn (black, white, brown), glue, cookie sheet.

Form a chunk of clay into the body, and pinch and pull one end (about one fourth of the chunk) at an angle for the head and neck. Pinch and pull out 4 equal parts for legs. Or, form the legs by rolling some clay into a rope, cutting into 4 equal pieces, and attaching them to the body. Shape the head and neck, with a hump in the neck. Pinch out bits to form ears.

Shape the legs and hooves. Split the hooves with a pencil or plastic knife. Insert a small length of wire from the bottom of each hoof into the body, to give the legs support, and make sure it stands evenly on all four legs.

Horns can be formed by covering curved bits of wire with grey clay, leaving wire protruding from the thicker end, then inserting the wire into the head. Use pencil to make eyes and nostrils.

After the clay yaks are formed, the teacher puts them on cookie sheet and bakes them. (If not enough time or facilities for baking, teacher can bring the baked yaks to the next class session for students to attach yarn for the fur.) The yarn can be combed to make it fluffy. Use a lot of school glue to attach the yarn to the back and forehead, then trim with scissors.



Here are some photos of yaks for students to refer to when creating their clay yak:

