

Khaita - Integrating With Movement

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Good day for everybody and everywhere. Today while we are waiting for the coming New Year we are going to do some [Khaita Dances](#). But before we start, I want to explain just a little about Khaita. I have already told you what Khaita is and how important it is for practitioners of Dzogchen. We are aspiring to be Dzogchen practitioners and in this case what is most important is that we integrate all the aspects of our body, speech, and mind in contemplation. The number one method for integration, the most effective, is to be present. If we try to be present when we dance Khaita, this is practice. It is much better than sitting somewhere for one or two hours chanting some mantras, because it is directed to the state of contemplation.

All of the Tibetan songs I have chosen [for the Khaita dances] are particularly meaningful for protecting Tibetan culture. In order to learn these dances, first of all we have the related transcriptions [of the songs] which I have included for Westerners because we know very well that you cannot read Tibetan. The transcriptions I made are not different for each country. For example, in Dharma centers each different country does transcriptions in their own way. However, it doesn't correspond to the Tibetan pronunciation. In Tibetan if you do not pronounce correctly you can be misunderstood. Particularly when we do the Rites of the Guardians, we read in Tibetan what we are offering, what we are asking for, what actions we are requesting, so it is important we pronounce the words very well. There are many words in Tibetan that have a similar sound, but when you listen carefully they are different. For example, *phag sha* means the meat of a pig, but a very similar word, *pha sha*, means meat of the father. So you see, if we pronounce in a wrong way, the guardians may misunderstand. So it is very important that we pronounce in a perfect way.

Then some Westerners say, "Why don't we translate prayers into the English language for English people, into the Italian language for Italians, and so on?" For prayers it does not work that way. Take, for example, the Seven Line Prayer. Originally they were words coming from Guru Padmasambhava. Then for centuries and centuries important Tibetan practitioners used them. They used them in the Tibetan language, not in English or Italian, and even if it had been necessary, they wouldn't have known [how to translate them]. So this is one reason. When we do prayers, invocations, etc., it is very important that we use them in Tibetan because this is related with the blessing of the lineage of all of those practitioners. Secondly, when something is translated it becomes very strange.

I remember many years ago when we were doing the Chöd practice one of my Italian students said, "I've translated the Chöd practice that we are doing into Italian, so we can sing it in Italian."

Then I listened. It sounded really very strange, even though he had succeeded in creating the same rhythmic structure as in the Tibetan (he did a lot of work!). The words said, “Oh, now we become a wrathful dakini; now we cut off our head; now we put it in the *kapala* on the top of three skulls.” Maybe that is the meaning in the practice, but in Tibetan when we do this kind of practice, there is a way of using the meaning that we can understand, and when we listen we don’t feel that strangeness. This is the reason that I don’t like it when you translate and sing things in a Western language. First of all, it is not connected with the transmission, and secondly, it doesn’t work that way.

For that reason when I started Khaita I tried to transcribe the pronunciation of all the words in a universal transcription for everyone in the Dzogchen Community. I did not invent it because I am not that kind of expert in language. When the government in East Tibet asked Kangkar Rinpoche and me to teach Tibetan language to Chinese officials working in offices, at that time we had two groups. One group of thirty or so students came from Beijing and already knew Tibetan language quite well, having studied it at university. They only needed to advance to a higher level with the help of Kangkar Rinpoche. This was the first class. Then, in the second class, I had more or less 130 students who were completely new [to Tibetan]. I had no experience in teaching language in that period. There was also a professor from Beijing with great expertise in language working with these students whose name was Yüdachao. He made a very precise transcription of Tibetan pronunciation in Latin characters and for many days I studied this and learned to use and write the Tibetan sounds using these characters. Then later I prepared all the teaching and study books for my students using this form of transcription.

I remember this transcription very well and when I started the Dzogchen Community, I used this transcription for all practices like Chöd and so on. A few sound combinations were missing since Yüdachao had developed the system for the general language only, so I invented and added a few symbols for words that are used in the teachings to make it more complete. To learn this transcription it is sufficient to study it for two or three days, then you can understand everything you need to apply. But you always have to practice to be able to read well.

When I started collecting Khaita songs, I thought that this system of transcription would also be very good for learning and training. When we sing we can understand the meaning a little and the reason that we are singing. And above all, day by day, we can learn how to use the transcription system. This becomes very useful for many practices that we need to use that are in the Tibetan language. This is the reason why I prepared the first book of 108 songs, the same as the number of beads on a *mala*.

Later I prepared a second book, containing 180 different Tibetan songs. About a third or a quarter of these songs already had corresponding dances, so we can learn how Tibetans dance and sing. Some of these songs have a wonderful meaning but no dance, so I asked our expert dancers to try to invent some new dances. Why did I collect this second set of 180 songs? When I started to research ancient Tibetan history, [I discovered that] in order to calculate how many years had

passed from the beginning of Tibetan history, Tibetans use a specific way of counting years that is part of Tibetan elemental astrology. For example, a short cycle consists of twelve years and is represented by twelve animals, as you already know. This is expanded into a cycle of sixty years [combining the twelve animals and five elements], called *metreng*, which is the more official cycle. Then, when we combine the *mewa* [9 numbers with the animal-element cycle] there is a greater cycle of 180 years called the *mekhor*. This is a very important method to understand how many years have passed.

So I wanted to do this second book equal to the quantity of a *mekhor*, a *mewa* cycle. I transcribed all of these songs for Westerners, put them in Tibetan, and also in translation. But if you only read the transcription and the Tibetan you won't be able to sing them, because the singers always add many [ornamental] words to make the songs sound more beautiful. Most of these words are not written, so you have to listen, understand, and add them. Then, [I also developed] a kind of system of symbols indicating the way to sing and if you look at the book you can understand them. I prepared everything very well.

In the last years we have had so many new dances – like the ones we were dancing the other day – that are easier and simpler. So I am preparing a third volume: about 72 songs are already ready, but even when I am no longer working on that, if we hear some interesting new music with dances, then I want to add these. For that reason I have set up the possibility for [this other group of] 180 songs, of which we already have 72. We can use this group and add to it for many years.

This is not working directly with Dharma teaching like Dzogchen. Nor is it like researching Tibetan history, which is also very important. But I understood it is very important that people learn and for that reason I have dedicated myself day and night working with transcriptions and so on. It takes me a long time to prepare just one of these songs, but I dedicate my time. However, when I dedicate myself and people are not interested then I feel upset. Why don't they understand how much I am working and that we are singing when there is the possibility? This is something very useful that people should understand. In general, almost every day we have Khaita: we sing one hour and then we dance. This is above all for practicing in reading the transcription. And then we can also understand the real sense of these songs. That way we are developing Khaita.

As I already said, we are aspiring to be Dzogchen practitioners. In Dzogchen practice we need to integrate everything, we don't focus on the principle of rules or systems like in monasteries. In monasteries we cannot dance, we cannot sing, and if you do then they ask you to purify that. I remember one Tibetan who came to my retreat and asked me, "But how is it possible: you are in a Dharma center, a spiritual path, and you are singing and dancing, which are forbidden in the monastery!" I replied that our way of seeing is different from that of the monasteries. This is an example: if we have knowledge of how we should integrate, then integrating with movement is one of the best methods. When we integrate with movement physically, that is also related to the energy level, to the breathing, and to the mind as well.

So it is a very simple practice. We consider it a kind of practice, it's not just that we enjoy and dance. Of course, when we dance together with people we know, it is nice. I don't feel bad when I am with many people and we are doing something. I enjoy it. But sometimes I can't enjoy because of my age and the condition of my health. When it is possible I do my best for integrating as much as possible. So singing and dancing are a very good method for integrating. How do we sing? We sing with the breathing, with the melody, and this is related to our energy level. We can also learn and understand a little the language of music because in Tibetan there are many words related only to dance, for example.

When I started to write down the Dance of the Vajra I did not know a single word of Tibetan terminology related to dance. Then little by little I looked in Tibetan books, and also thought how it should be, and I developed the book of the Dance of the Vajra. Today when I see the books on the Dance of the Vajra I am surprised about how I succeeded in writing down all these things! For example, when I learned a dance in a dream sometimes I did not remember everything precisely. Then I felt sorry that I couldn't write it down. And when I felt sorry, later I would have another dream repeating it, or someone would dance with me while I was learning and would explain in detail how I should dance. That way I developed a lot. In particular, in Tibetan books there is a Kalachakra dance. It is not an ordinary dance, but with a mantra, a long mantra, and is also called a Vajra Dance. So when I was writing down the Dance of the Vajra I searched for this Kalachakra book. I had never studied it but I remembered that it existed. And when I was dancing and had to turn to the right and left with different kinds of turnings, I found and learned the names for them with this book.

Later, when I was writing down the Khaita songs, some of these songs explain how the melody is, how the movement is, etc., and I started to understand many different terms I had never heard before. This is an example of how we developed slowly slowly. And when we thought that we needed to make these Khaita dances available, we called them 'Khaita'. *Kha* means "space"; *khai* means "of space." For example, my name is Namkhai, not Namkha, so it means "of space" or "of the sky." Then for the word melody we used *ta*. *Ta* is very diffused in Tibetan songs and dances. The full form of the word is *yangta*. At first I did not know that *ta* also means melody because it is written just like the word for 'horse,' so I thought it meant only that. But in songs and dances *ta* means melody. Then I had the idea to create this interesting name, Khaita. Many Tibetans who have never studied dance and are not familiar with that aspect of the meaning, even if they are scholars, do not understand that it means "Melody of space." Instead they think it means "Horse of space" and then they wonder, "What is 'Horse of space?'"

In the word *lungta* [Tibetan prayer flag], *ta* is written in the same way as the word for horse. Everybody knows this term, because *lungta* is very diffused. It doesn't mean horse, but *lungta*. In the center of a *lungta* is a horse. In ancient times, in the pre-Buddhist Bönpo era, the horse was a symbol of energy. When they wanted to say that something was very quick they said "just like a horse." Today we would not use horse, but perhaps an airplane or a rocket going to the moon, for example. They are superior to the horse. But in ancient times the symbol of energy was the horse

and it was also related to the four other elements. In the ancient Bön tradition the four elements were not earth, fire, water, and wind. Earth, fire, water, and wind were simply considered dimensions in which there was movement and life.

If you look closely, on a small *lungta* in the center there is usually a horse and in the four directions there are four animals – the tiger, lion, dragon, and garuda – that are the symbols of the elements. In ancient Bön times the garuda was basically the symbol of energy. A flaming garuda is also just like a deity that represents fire, because that animal moves in the dimension of fire. The tiger is the symbol of the air element because tigers live in the forest where there is a lot of wood. In elemental astrology, also in the Chinese tradition, wood corresponds to the air element. The snow lion represents the element of the earth. Tibetans believe that this animal lives in very high snow mountains, so in the dimension of earth. How does earth correspond with a mountain like Kailash or Everest? We have very soft earth, which then becomes like a rock, and the rock then becomes just like crystal. For that reason very high mountains remain like that for centuries and centuries. And in high mountains the snow always remains as well. So this is the dimension of the earth element. Then we have the dragon, which is considered a water animal. In general in a Tibetan *mandala*, the *chusin* is presented as a powerful water animal, but in the real sense the *chusin* and the dragon are the same principle. So the dragon represents the water element because its origin, its real dimension, is water. Since we all have these elements, we need to develop them, so that is why we prepare the *lungta*.

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