



Chapter Eight

Places of Enlightenment: The Sacred Geography of Yolmo and Maratika

The Buddhism of Tibet was formed in a landscape of intense beauty and splendor. It is no wonder, then, that the physical environment became a support for internal spiritual development. This is most poignant in the tradition of Dzogchen, where gazing into the sky has long been used to facilitate experiencing the vast and luminous nature of mind and meditation retreat in remote mountainous areas is emphasized.

Over 1000 years ago, Guru Padmasambhava recognized that certain areas in the Himalayan region were highly conducive to realization. Some he practiced at extensively himself, such as Maratika in eastern Nepal, where he attained immortality by achieving union with Amitayus—the Buddha of Infinite Life. Others he discovered while traveling to Tibet and wrote about in his hidden *terma* texts to encourage future devotees to practice at these powerful places, such as Yolmo in northern Nepal.

Chatral Rinpoche has been guiding disciples in Yolmo for several decades, many whom engage in the traditional three year, three month retreat. The Yolmo valley has many different aspects that are beneficial to practitioners. Ian Baker writes,

Chatral Rinpoche said that specific [places] in Yolmo are conducive to particular kinds of practice. Places with

waterfalls inspire reflection on impermanence. Places with steep cliffs where the rocks are dark and jagged are good for meditating on wrathful deities. Places with rolling hills and flowering meadows support meditation on peaceful deities...

...Chatral Rinpoche clarified that the *beyul** that Padmasambhava established in Tibet are not literal Arcadias,** but paradises for Buddhist practice, with multiple dimensions corresponding to increasingly subtle levels of perception. Beyond Yolmo's visible terrain of mountains, streams, and forests, he said, lies an inner level, corresponding to the flow of intangible energies in the physical body. Deeper still, the subtle elements animating the environment merge with the elements present within the practitioner—the secret level. Finally, at the *beyul*'s innermost level—*yangsang*—lies a paradisiacal, or unitary dimension revealed through an auspicious conjunction of person, place, and time...Chatral Rinpoche contended that *yangsang* is not merely a metaphor for the enlightened state, but an ever-present, if hidden, reality.⁶⁴

Chatral Rinpoche wrote the following poem about Yolmo:

The mountains rise like spiked weapons towards the sun.
The mountains that lie in shadow spread like flames.
In this snow-encircled, broad sandy plain,
Padmasambhava and an assembly of realized beings,
Thinking of those in later generations,
Hid innumerable profound Dharma treasures.

All around and in every place, fragrances fill the air.
Plantains and other edible plants
Bloom in abundance without being sown.
Amiable birds, waterfowl and wood pigeons
Empty the mind of its weariness.
Inner understanding and virtues naturally increase,

* Beyul are hidden places that are particularly effective for Buddhist practice.

** Arcadia was an isolated region in ancient Greece where residents lived in complete simplicity.

Benefiting the activity of path, view and meditation.

For the practitioner of *rushen** and *chöd*
There is no better place than this!
This strife-free hidden-land of Padmasambhava,
Is no different than the eight great charnel grounds of India.
Surrounded by moats of water
And walls of earth and rock,
Graced perpetually by clouds, mist and rain,
The valley is naturally sealed from the outer world.

If from among hundreds there are a few
Endeavoring to practice Dharma from their hearts,
I say, "Come to this place
For the attainment of Buddhahood in this life!"
Practitioners of the inner yogas
Remove obstructing conditions here.

May there be spontaneous and auspicious benefit
For oneself and others.⁶⁵



Maratika is one of the most sacred sites in the world to devotees of Padmasambhava, for it is here that he achieved immortality while doing Amitayus practices with his consort Mandarava. It is the power place that those in Chatral Rinpoche's tradition go to when engaging in longevity practices. Perhaps Chatral Rinpoche's own longevity (being healthy and active in his 90's) is a result of the time he spent practicing in Maratika.

He wrote the following for those who are unfamiliar with the place and who might one day have the opportunity to practice there.

* Rushen is a Dzogchen preliminary practice of distinguishing the dualistic mind from nondual awareness, in order to weaken the notion of an independent self.

***The Melodious Tambura of
Joy:^{*}***
***A Guide to the Supreme Holy Place of
Immortal Life, the Rocky Cave of Maratika***

By Chatral Rinpoche

Homage to the guru, yidam and dakinis.
To the essence of all appearances, Padma Amitayus.^{**}
To the embodiment of emptiness, the great mother,
clothed in white,⁺
To the three root long life deities,⁶⁶
the mudra of non-duality,
I bow down with devotion and beseech you
to bestow the empowerment of immortal life.

North of Bodhgaya—the center of the universe—within a rocky mountain covered with trees and bushes, is the widely renowned wondrous holy place called Haleshi,⁺⁺ which I will now describe, so listen for a moment with joy.

Outwardly, it is the blissful play of Shiva and Umadevi.⁶⁷
Inwardly, it is the palace of Chakrasamvara.⁺⁺ Secretly, it is the celestial mansion of the deities of immortal life and most secretly, it is the pure land of great bliss, the absolute Akanishta⁺⁺ realm.

In the past, when the Vidhyadhara Pema Thödrengrsal⁺⁺⁺ and his enchanting divine consort Mandarava engaged in the

^{*} A tambura is an unfretted lute of India, used as a drone.

^{**} Amitayus belongs to the Padma (Lotus) family of Buddhas.

⁺ White Tara, the goddess invoked in long-life practices.

⁺⁺ Haleshi is the Nepali name for Maratika.

⁺⁺ Chakrasamvara is a blue-black, 4-faced, 12-armed deity often depicted with his consort. He is also known as “Heruka.”

⁺⁺ Akanishta is considered the very highest plane of existence.

⁺⁺⁺ One of the manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava.

secret practice of directly entering [the mandala]⁶⁸ at this place, the empowerment of immortal life was bestowed upon them by Amitayus, Buddha of Infinite Life. Attaining the body that is without birth or death, decrepitude or disintegration, Guru Rinpoche even now dwells in the southwest, subduing the rakshas,* continuously sending forth emanation after emanation in whatever way necessary to benefit beings in cyclic existence.**

Later, from between the eyes of Songtsen Gampo—who was Avalokiteshvara in person—the noble monk Akarma was emanated. When the noble monk Akarma was erecting a statue of the eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara in the Jokhang,⁶⁹ he went in search of special substances to make it with and relics to put inside. He miraculously arrived at Maratika and at that time saw the faces of many deities. He called it the Practice Cave “Mandala of Glorious Qualities” and uttered many other praises. This provides a reliable source and proof of Maratika’s greatness.

When the heretical teacher Shankaracharya caused much harm to the Buddhist doctrine in India and Nepal, many old sacred sites and holy objects were destroyed, scattered and lost. After that, all his followers took them over as places to worship Shiva.

At the present time, people make special offerings of bell and cymbal music, tridents, 100 or 1000 butter lamps, incense, flowers, milk and the three white offerings.⁷⁰ But not one person offers live sacrifice or red offerings. Their pujas, performed with the slow and fast playing of drums, cymbals, white conches and many types of instruments of the blowing and twirling variety, cause the sounds of *ur-ur*, *chem-chem*, and so forth to resound in the cave.

They continuously make offering and praises to Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and other worldly deities. Adhering to their

* The “rakshas” are cannibal demons on an island imperceptible to humans, which Guru Padmasambhava went to in the late 9th Century to make as his pureland realm.

** Chatral Rinpoche himself is considered a mind emanation of Guru Padmasambhava.

ancient traditions, they differentiate between superior and inferior castes from brahmin to butcher, and there are those who are allowed and those who are not allowed to enter the cave. Some of the inferior castes may only sit at the entrance of the cave.

Especially during the tenth of the month, the waxing and waning stages of the moon and other excellent days, I have seen brahmin priests inside the cave with mandalas of colored sand and huge fire ceremonies.

As all individuals have their own perception, it is not right to harbor wrong views and speak maligning words. One should maintain pure vision, rejoice, and give praise—thus making a good connection. To slander other people or their deities is the basis for misfortune.

To arouse interest and develop faith in outsiders—Buddhists and ordinary people—and to dispel arguments about this holy place at the same time, I began with an explanation of the history of Maratika.

EMA! * Having mentioned some of the qualities of this holy place, which are clearly evident even to ordinary people, there can hardly be room for disagreement. In addition, it is said in the commentaries, with good reason, that even the words of a child—if authentic and well-spoken—should suffice in describing such a place.

On seeing this place, boundless wonder arises. Through merely hearing the name, the seed of liberation is planted. By recalling it, accidental death is prevented. Through making prostrations, circumambulation and offerings, great accumulation of merit is accomplished.

The sky around it forms a vast eight-spoked wheel. The ground is shaped like an eight-petalled lotus with the middle swelling up like the flower's pistil. The landscape being wide and open, the sun remains for a long time and the weather is temperate. In the front, a stream gushes forth. The center of the holy place is a huge self-existing assembly hall, high and spacious with room for one thousand people. There is a single skylight in the center shaped like a round wheel.

* This is short for “Emaho,” which means “How marvelous!”

Outside, various shrubs and trees grow out of the craggy rocks. Inside the cave, innumerable images of statues, seed-syllables and hand implements of the peaceful and wrathful deities abound. The unique characteristic of this holy place is the many stone lingam (stalagmites) ranging in size from six feet to six inches. Naturally formed, they are white, smooth, shiny and resplendent.

During auspicious times, nectar collects like moist dew and drips down. There are many crevice-like holes through which one can test one's positive or negative karma to see whether one is headed for a birth in the lower realms or to the higher realms and the path of liberation.

Below this holy place is a cave whose entrance faces to the southwest. The mouth of the cave is not so big, but once inside it opens up and is very wide and spacious, with enough room to fit a hundred people. There are many symbols of the body, speech and mind of the enlightened ones as well as hand and foot imprints, a white conch and many other amazing self-arisen things. When those of fortunate karma arrive there, dew-like nectar seeps out. Straight above, unobstructed, is a high vaulted skylight, making it renowned as a training place for the practice of transferring one's consciousness to a Pureland.

In the spacious expanse of the main cave are hosts of bats who you can't see but who ceaselessly make the sound of the mantra of long life (one hears the sounds of *tsey* and *bhrum*).

For all tantric practitioners who have entered the path, it is a very good place for the practice of visualizing a luminous wheel of deities and mantras.

This text, which mentions only a drop from the ocean of good qualities of this holy place, was composed with the thought of benefiting others. Like a wish-fulfilling gem or an excellent vase, may it unfailingly bring all our wishes to fruition.

Having been introduced to this sacred place, it is certain that we Dharma brothers and sisters who follow Guru Padmasambhava will accumulate merit and purify obscurations by engaging in the recitation of mantras, the offering of tormas, the performing of fire ceremonies and especially the practices of longevity here.

By the merit of composing this,

May all beings under the sky be saved
from untimely death and present obstacles
And ultimately, having attained the level
of the protector Amitayus,
Lead all beings to that state.

By the blessings and power of the truth
And the wondrous compassion
of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
Removing all harmful and disadvantageous
circumstances without exception,
May we reside in continuous glory
and may each day and night be auspicious.

*My daughter Saraswasti Devi with offerings of a stainless scarf
and writing paper requested me to write a praise of this holy
place. Therefore, I, the old vagabond father Sangye Dorje,
wrote this in the Fire Tiger Year on an excellent day of the tenth
month, between sessions, at the supreme holy place of Maratika,
which puts an end to death. SHUBHAM.*

Translated by Zach Larson.