

THREADS OF BLESSING

Creating traditional blessing
and protection cords



The giving of sacred cords for people to wear is found in several ancient spiritual traditions, most notably Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, but similar cords are also a part of Nepalese, Tuvan and some Mongolian shamanistic traditions too. They are generally thought of as either 'blessing cords' or 'protection cords,' and sometimes a cord is given to remind the wearer of a vow taken, or an empowerment ceremony received.

In shamanism, they can be a very simple - but effective - magical and psychologically beneficial thing to give to clients, which acts as a magical device, a powerful placebo and a reminder of a sacred process - such as a healing. The tradition is, however fairly unknown in the West, outside of Buddhism, and so this article aims to bring them to a wider audience.

The cords are generally called *bsrung mdud* (pronounced *sung dü*) in Tibet, while in Nepal they are called *rakashya bandhan* and in Mongolia *zangia*.

In Buddhism, the cords are blessed and given by lamas on important occasions, for example when one takes a Buddhist vow, does an important retreat, or receives special - often secret - teachings or empowerments.

Some cords, known as *tshedue*, or 'life cords', are given with the aim of helping longevity, however, cords are mostly given as a general benediction; to help with health issues; to 'seal' a healing after it has been performed; for personal protection - especially during travelling - and other reasons.

It is for these kinds of more general reasons that cords are given within shamanism, most often by a shaman to a client, but on occasion - as in Buddhism - they can also be given to a student

after a special initiation.

Cords are generally made of wool, cotton or silk, and sometimes of thin strips of fabric. Modern ones are also sometimes made of synthetic material like nylon, but I would imagine most readers would want to stick to natural materials. A cotton or wool one will generally break after a few weeks, a well made silk one might last a year or more.

The colour of the cords vary, but often they are red. Red is seen as a protective colour in a lot of cultures worldwide. It represent blood, and therefore life. Many cultures (including some ancient British ones) painted front doors and windows red to stop spirits getting into a house. In Native American traditions many healing objects have red handles in some form or another, to protect the healer from sickness. Red can also represent fearlessness, courage and bravery, ideal attributes if one is performing a little shamanic protection magic.

Other colours used will depend on the vision of the shaman and the reason the cord is being given. For example, Bhola Banstola the Nepalese shaman gives tri-colour cords - red, black and blue - when giving an empowerment into the practices of certain spirits, such as Kali or Mahakala. The same sort of thing can occur within Buddhism, different colours representing different Buddhist beings.

Some Tibetan practices use multicoloured stranded cords - such as yellow, white, red, green and blue - which represent the four directions and the centre; the five elements (earth, air, fire, water and space); as well as the five Buddha families and other things.

However, red is a general good, 'go to' colour, but if you decide to take up this practice you should use colours which have



significance to you and your own cosmology.

Cords are tied on generally with just a simple knot, one which won't come undone, but within Buddhism there are also specific, magical knots too, each done in a special way. The 'scorpion knot' is one example of these. This knot is associated with some wrathful practices, and the knot represents a scorpion, which is considered to be a wrathful form of Padmasambhava who fights to overcome harmful spirits of various kinds.

Cords can either be a single strand, or several strands twisted or plaited together. The plaiting method gives a stronger and tidier looking finished cord, but takes longer to make. However, the extra time needed allows more intent and focus to be placed upon the empowerment of the cord, as it is empowered during its construction.

In Buddhism, the empowerment is done by a lama going into a meditative state where they 'arise' as the powerful being who is giving the protection or blessing. The term 'arise' in Buddhism means that they practitioner has stopped being themselves, and has become the Buddhist being they are meditating upon, be it a peaceful being like Green Tara, or a wrathful being like Mahakala.

This is very similar in many ways to having ones shamanic spirit helper 'come into you' while you are in a light trance, rather like a traditional shaman would get taken over by their helper spirit, only in Buddhism it is generally in a more

Top left: a Tibetan lama empowers a cord by blowing upon it

the beings mantra and visualising oneself as that being.

While in this empowered state, overshadowed by the Buddhist being, or the shamanic helper spirit, the lama, or shaman, breathes sacred breath onto the cord, and may also say a mantra associated with that being or spirit helper too - should mantras be part of the tradition they work with.

This breath empowerment means that through sacred breath, the lama or shaman has commanded any and all harmful spirits to refrain from harming the person wearing the cord, that the person with the cord is under the lama or shaman's - together with their spirit helper's - protection.

This is really the concept of windhorse, spiritual power contained in the breath. Windhorse - lung ta in Tibetan, and hiimori in Mongolian - is a shaman's power, a little like chi or prana. It is power, and the breath of life contains this power, which is why a shaman uses it - especially if they are - even lightly - possessed by their spirit helper, because then their breath is the breath of the spirit.

If you are not a person who works with mantras, but you like the idea of them, a very simple all purpose mantra you can use is 'Om Ah Hung'. This mantra is used for general blessings, cleanings and empowerments. Om (white) represents the mind, Ah (red) represents the throat, and Hung (blue) represents the heart, and saying it is regarded as a benediction of mind, speech and body.

When plaiting a cord using a mantra, one can imagine each of the mantra's syllables - in this case Om, Ah and Hung - going into the cord and sitting like a precious jewel or star of light in the fabric of the plat. If you wish, you can learn and imagine the tibetan characters for these in the three colours shown.

Within both Buddhism and shamanism, visualisation is an important tool, and just because you 'imagine it', it doesn't mean it is not real. So, by doing this, you are in truth making a cord filled with mantras, or light, or blessings.

If the client is in front of you, you can tie the cord on them

from you, and you have to send the cord through the post, it is a good idea to instruct them to ask a loved one to tie it on them. The loved one acts as a witness, which helps give the process a special, ritual feel, adding to the intent. This practice works through a mix of your intent and your clients intent, so the more you can engage them the better.

In the series of photos to the right a Tuvan shaman prepares and gives a cord to an elderly woman. he starts the process by getting member's of the womans family to help him plait it, by holding it, to add their intent to the ritual.

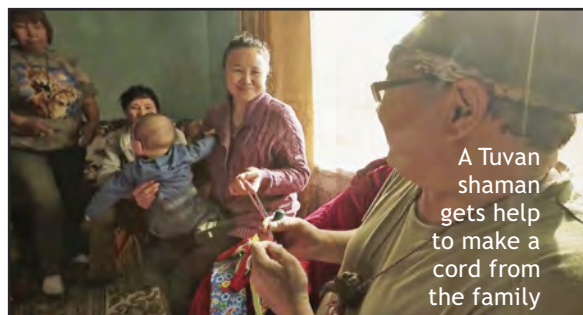
The cord can be placed around the clients wrist or neck. The ends should be tied together tightly so the knot can't come undone. It should be loose enough on the body that it is comfortable - not cutting into the flesh - but tight enough to the skin to ensure it can't get pulled off when the client removes their clothes.

It should be worn 24/7, for as long as your instructions say. If you are someone who practices shamanism, ask your spirits how long the person should wear it. Often it will be until the cord breaks.

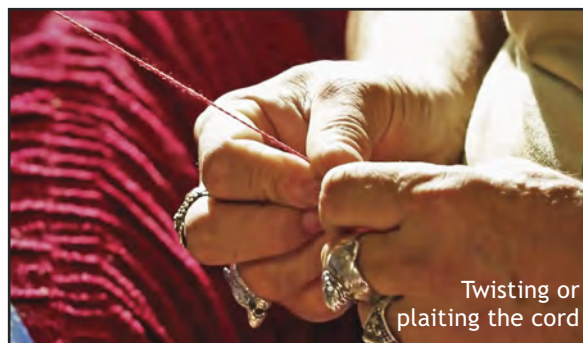
Once the cord is either removed or breaks, it can either be kept as a sacred object in it's own right - perhaps tied to something like your drum - or it can be lovingly disposed of in nature - which is another reason to use only natural materials. It is never to be simply discarded and thrown away.

It is good to make a cord freshly for each client, then the act of making for a specific person is part of your intent towards that person. But cords can be made in advance, and certainly would be in the case of cords given at a group empowerment. Cords, can also be bought, and are becoming a bit of a fashion thing, even available on Etsy, eBay and Amazon; but I would always say avoid these, a cord given as a sacred object should be made as a sacred object.

This is a simple and yet powerful sacred process, with an ancient history and a wide use. Cords are a useful tool for you to have in your kit bag, so keep calm and carry on cording.



A Tuvan shaman gets help to make a cord from the family



Twisting or plaiting the cord



Empowering the cord by blowing on it



Tying on the cord



Tying on the cord

