



Left: a Lhamo in Ladakh performs a healing

MONASTIC AUTHORISED SHAMANS

The Lhapa
Tradition
of Tibet

Buddhism came to Tibet in the eighth century, mostly from India, although with influences from China, which received Buddhism from India before it arrived in Tibet. Before that Tibet had a rich shamanic tradition, which it shared with much of Central Asia. This pre-Buddhist tradition is generally known as Bön, but Buddhism quickly started to persecute these pre-Buddhist traditions, and they have changed over the years to fit in, so modern Bön now bears little resemblance to the historic pre-Buddhist traditions of the region.

However many of these pre-Buddhist elements are interwoven within modern Bön and Buddhism, especially in the oldest schools of Buddhism known as the 'Red Hat' sects, which were established in the early Buddhist days of Tibet. Subsequently Buddhism was 'cleaned up' by later reformers who became known as the 'Yellow Hat' sects. The Dalai Lama is a member of a Yellow Hat sect.

Tibet was a land of spirits, and it still is. When Buddhism arrived it brought with it many of the spirits and gods that had evolved from the Indian gods of the Buddha's homeland, but it also 'converted' a great many of the original Tibetan shamanic spirits, and turned them Buddhist - in much the same way that early Christianity took pagan gods and goddesses (such as Brigid) and made them into saints.

Many of these ancient spirits were said to have been fought and conquered by Padmasambhava - a powerful Indian Buddhist mystic and magician - who was reported to have travelled all over Tibet, fighting the ancient spirits and binding them with an oath to thereafter defend Buddhism. These beings are known as *dharma* (chos skyong in Tibetan) which means protectors of the Buddha's teachings (*dharma*).

Below: Wrathful Tibetan Buddhist protector beings.

These are part of the retinue of a more powerful spirit. Many of these retinue beings were once local shamanic land or protector spirits which Buddhism incorporated

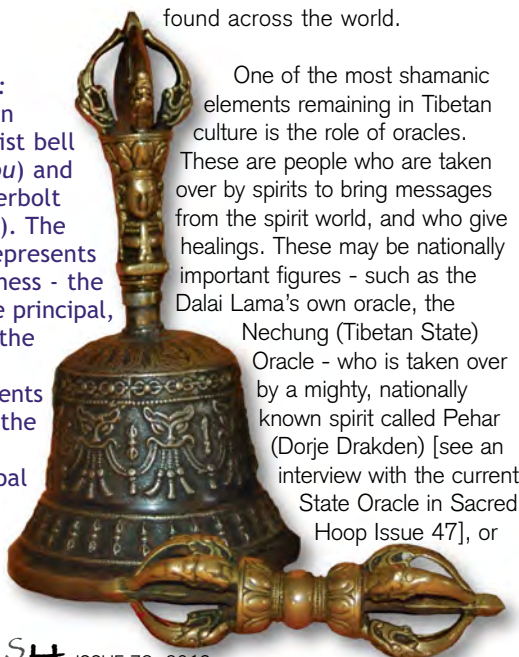




Above: Former Tibetan State Oracle in full regalia

Top right: Ayu Lhamo, a famous village lhamo from Ladakh

Below: Tibetan Buddhist bell (*dril-bu*) and thunderbolt (*dorje*). The bell represents emptiness - the female principal, while the dorje represents form - the male principal



Oracles are people who are taken over by spirits to bring messages. They may be nationally important figures, such as the Tibetan State Oracle, or oracles serving rural communities who are taken over by local land spirits



they might be local oracles serving rural communities, who are taken over by local protector spirits or land spirits, unknown outside of a small geographic area.

Generally known as lhapa (male) or lhamo (female) [*lha* meaning spirit or god, with *pa* or *mo* added after to denote if it is a man or a woman], these are Tibet's shamans.

Being a lhapa is a serious business; there is an account of one monastic oracle who did not respect the protector spirit who came through them. The spirit took the oracle over, and in trance made him disembowel himself and place his own entrails on the altar as offerings.

The lhapas of Tibet have not fared very well since the Chinese invasion, and although there are some still within the country itself, many fled to Nepal, although the tradition there is in danger of passing away. In other Himalayan Tibetan cultural lands outside of Tibet proper - such as Bhutan, Ladakh, Sikkim and Mustang - where the Chinese invasion did not happen - the tradition can still be found.

Most lhapa are lay people working in the villages, although a few are ordained and work in monasteries. They mostly work in trance, having been taken over by a spirit or spirits, and it is these spirits who are seen to be the ones giving the information or doing the healing. In Ladakh the word *lus-gyar* means 'a person in trance,' *lus* means body and *gyar* means borrowed.

They do not generally enjoy high status in Tibetan society - with a few exceptions such as lhapas of high rank like the Tibetan State oracle -

as Buddhist monks and rinpoches are seen as being more spiritually potent. Village lhapas generally work under the guidance of their local monastery, and they are examined by monks when their shamanic talents first manifest, to see if they are truly a fledgling lhapa or simply a person possessed by a harmful spirit.

Monasteries maintain their control over the lhapas because lhapas enter into what they consider to be an uncontrolled, unprescribed Buddhist trance state, and also because the spirits that possess them are considered to rank low in the Buddhist pantheon - generally because they are the pre-Buddhist local nature spirits. Village lhapas also rank lower than monastery oracles for the same reasons, as their spirits rank lower than the monastic oracle spirits, and village trance practice is even less controlled than that of ordained oracle monks.

TOOLS OF THE LHAPA

When practicing, a lhapa wears a set of 'god clothes,' which are similar to those worn by monks on special occasions such as funerals. These clothes represent the clothes of the Buddhas and high spirits, and include a *ringa* (ritual crown). This headdress is the most important item of dress and it is put on last (or second to last as sometimes a scarf is tied over the mouth so that the spirit speaking through its human is not polluted).

This crown represents the complex Buddhist cosmology; on the simplest level it represents the five Buddha families, but it also represents five types of spirits, the five elements (air, water, earth, fire and space) which each Buddha

family are associated with, as well as the four points of the compass and the centre, with which they are also associated; in effect it is shorthand for a deep, multi level, incredibly rich map of creation which holds deep wisdom about the way aspects of the universe interrelate and are connected. In a way it is very similar to the Native American medicine wheel.

Lhapas also generally wear a cape and an apron, and often cover their heads with another scarf before putting on the *ringa* crown.

The sacred items a lhapa uses can be quite extensive, depending on their specialisation, but they will normally have close to hand a double sided *damaru* drum, which can vary in size from a few inches to around a foot across, a Buddhist bell (*dril-bu*) or a Bön bell (*shang*), a ritual bronze thunderbolt (*dorje*), prayer beads (*tenga*), an metal extraction pipe for sucking out poison (*pun*) and a ritual dagger (*phurba*).

BECOMING A LHAPA

Often the role of lhapa runs in a family, but this is not always the case. However, it is not uncommon for a relative of a recently deceased lhapa to inherit the calling, and this is explained as the need of a spirit to find a new vessel to come through. But as always, even before a close relative lhapa is recognised, they will still have to undergo exactly the same testing as someone from a non-lhapa family who develops the symptoms. Men and women become village lhapas or lhamos in roughly equal numbers.

The untrained lhapa will be a person who experiences a violent loss of control, which in Western culture we would call an episode of mental illness. In local terms however, this means that the person is 'weak' and a spirit can take them over easily.

A diagnosis will be made, either by an established lhapa or a monk, and if the diagnosis is that the affected person is really a fledgling lhapa, (rather than someone who is mentally ill), this diagnosis must then be ratified by a high ranking monk or rinpoche before it can be accepted.

As mental illness is considered to be spirit-caused anyway, it is essential for the monastery to determine which spirit is invading. If

it is a hostile and harmful spirit it will be driven out in exorcisms, but if it is an appropriate spirit for a lhapa, they will be encouraged to learn to control the spirit and use it for the benefit of the local community.

However because the monasteries generally disapprove of these low local spirits, a validation from a monastery also invites some - at best unspoken - disapproval, and some fledgling lhapas try to get rid of the invading spirit through exorcism and give up any possible lhapa career.

But those who pursue the calling train with an established lhapa who acts as their teacher, the teachings often given in exchange for substantial sums of money. The teacher will teach ceremonies, healing techniques, how to maintain the shrine to their spirits and other practical matters, and the teacher-pupil bond is often very close and life-long.

Training is also closely connected with the local monastery, and in particular with a local rinpoche or high ranking lama, who will suggest sacred places to visit on pilgrimage, and Buddhist practices to develop the fledgling lhapas spiritual muscle.

Being a lhapa is most often a part-time occupation, a lhapa will continue to be a farmer or whatever trade they had before they received their calling.

AN ENTRANCING CEREMONY

During the diagnosis of a lhapa, sometimes established lhapas and monks will together perform a ceremony which culminates in the creation of a new oracle. This is often a kind of 'last hope' ceremony, when the fledgling lhapa is suffering greatly

under the effect of the spirits and often reluctantly

agrees to incorporate them harmoniously, and so become a lhapa to end their suffering.

In this ceremony, a room is prepared and an altar built and ritual arrows are placed in pots of barley. Ritual arrows feature quite a lot in both Buddhist ritual and non-Buddhist magic in Tibet.

The established lhapa then calls their spirits to come into them, and goes into trance. The fledgling lhapa then enters the room and sits opposite the established lhapa.

A plate of barley dough *torma* (offering cakes), which had been ritually made by the monks, is then thrown. The throwing of *torma* is often a part of exorcisms - the blessed *torma* are thrown at invading spirits. After this the possessed, established lhapa

Below: Tibetan ritual dagger (*phurba*)



Below: Tantric Crown with images of the five Buddha families



Below: Ayu Lhamo performs a healing on a young woman



starts to sing ritual songs encouraging the fledgling lhapa to become fully possessed by the spirit. The song instructs them to pick up all the items of a lhapa - which are laid out before them -

*"If you are a true spirit,
take your lhapa's clothes.
If you are a true spirit,
cover your mouth with a scarf.
If you are a true spirit,
take up this drum and bell."*

The song mentions every article of the ritual dress and equipment, and as the fledgling becomes fully possessed, a second song is sung which asks the invading spirit to come fully into their midst and speak through the fledgling lhapa

*"Please, don't stay
at the top of the mountain,
come here to the people.
come fully into this person
and speak to us."*

Then sometimes monks begin to play a game of ritual dice, while the spirit possessing the conducting lhapa sings a song from an ancient epic tale about King Gesar, a first-shaman figure who travelled through the worlds of gods, spirits and humans at the dawn of human time. Lhapas often make claims of kinship with Gesar, and some construct detailed genealogies that reach right back to him.

The song tells a part of the epic where Gesar plays dice with a dwarf. Gesar has learned that his wife has been captured by the enemy who are invading his country. Rushing

home to rescue her he meets the dwarf and they play dice; the song describes the game. Gesar starts badly and loses everything - kingdom, wife and horse; then his guardian spirit tells him to gamble his ribs and Gesar wins the throw. The dwarf is so terrified at the thought of losing his ribs that he promises great help to Gesar. The game in the ceremony is played until Gesar wins.

Next, two special offerings are given to the spirits. One is a small black doll representing a girl, and the other is a small white doll representing a boy. These type of offerings, called *lud*, are often substitutes for a sick person, and are given to the spirits causing illness as a kind of ransom during healing ceremonies.

The fledgling lhapa is then asked to speak and declare themselves and their intention.

The spirit possessing the established lhapa then challenges it and asks if the spirit possessing the fledgling lhapa is willing to be taught by them - yes or no!

If they say "no" or say nothing at all, they are banished from the fledgling lhapa and the reasons for the failure and any remedies needed are given by the officiating lhapas possessing spirit.

If the fledgling lhapa's spirit says "yes" they are told that they must help all living beings and follow the advice of the high lamas.

Then the officiating established lhapa's spirit sings more songs, challenging the fledgling lhapa's

spirit to answer questions about the spirit world and the spirits who live in it. This is where the ritual arrows are used, as they represent these different spirits, and are used to demonstrate that the fledgling lhapa's spirit knows the correct cosmology.

Eventually the last arrow - a black one - is picked up by the fledgling lhapa and broken. This broken arrow, representing evil, is then thrown outside to a chorus of "*tha gyallo*" (victory to the gods). Then further questions and instruction is given and eventually both the officiating lhapa and the fledgling lhapa bless all those present and come out of trance. After the

trance, consecrated dough *torma* offerings are given to every house in the village and special offerings to wrathful spirits called 'golden drinks' (black tea or barley beer poured into a special offering vessel called a *serkyem* until it overflows) are made.

THE LHAPA CAREER PATH

Village lhapas generally remain suspect, not only to the monastic authorities but also often to the local people. But if they serve the local people well, then over time their reputations get better.

Their reputation also depends upon close links with the local monastery, which not only provide a public validation of their authenticity, but also gives a deeper training in Buddhism. Some lhapas will spend half their days in meditation and prayer, and go on long pilgrimages each year. Some, if they can afford it, also give donations or gifts to their local monasteries.

With this steady focus on their reputations, over time, they are seen less and less as an incarnation of demonic low spirits, who might even be enemies of the Buddhas, and instead increasingly become seen as incarnations of the higher spirits.

Well respected lhapas can also acquire more spirits who can begin to use them as vessels as more Buddhist teachings are learned. If these are not merely local land spirits, but instead are monastery spirits, known to defend Buddhism and be essential parts of Buddhist teaching, the lhapas status increases considerably.

Tibetan Buddhism, Lamaism, has often had a troublesome relationship with shamanism. In Mongolia, where it eventually spread, it experienced much conflict with the local shamans, although it never managed to subjugate them as fully as it did in Tibet.

Many ancient shamanic spirits are now hidden within Buddhism, incorporated into it and the same spirits are still worked with by shamans in Mongolia and up into Southern Siberia - sometimes with a mix of both Buddhist and shamanic elements in the ritual, with even both Buddhist lamas and shamans taking part in them.

Although heavily controlled by Buddhism, it would seem - as in Christianised Europe - the ancient spirits will have their voice, and nothing can stop them.

Below: Pouring strong black tea into a *serkyem* as an offering to the wrathful protector spirits

