

LIBERATION

Working with an Ancient Tibetan form of Exorcism as a Shamanic Healing Technique

Nicholas Breeze Wood



Right: the dough linga inside the triangular iron box, complete with turquoise eyes and a coral mouth to help 'awaken' the finished effigy. Linga are symbolic, and do not need to

In the shamanistically-fused, magical Tibetan Buddhist traditions, there is an ancient rite which the Tibetans called *bsgral-ba*, which translates to 'liberation' in English.

Those who practice liberation take the view that a spirit - or even a person - who causes harm to others is suffering themselves, and trapped in an unfortunate state of existence, an unfortunate life.

Because of this, through the rite, they are 'liberated' from this life and the negative karma they have accumulated over time - which has resulted in their present birth and suffering. Liberation is, of course, a euphemism, it means they are killed, so they can be separated

from their negative karma and achieve a more positive rebirth.

The evidence for this rite is very ancient, there are numerous C7th and C8th texts from a cave at Dunhuang, a place on the Silk Road, in Gansu Province, northwestern China, which are manuals for its practice. The cave is a treasure trove for early manuscripts, containing many Tibetan, Islamic and even Christian texts, on a wide variety of subjects, many of them highly esoteric.

The origin of this method of working is perhaps lost in the depths of pre-Buddhist time, but

one important central myth regarding it is the story of the demon Rudra.

Although a god in Hindu cosmology, Buddhist cosmology sees Rudra as a one-time great practitioner of Buddhism, who gradually became a monstrous demon because he lacked compassion. So, as way to heal the wound on the earth which Rudra was creating, a Buddha - a being of great compassion - forced a trident into the belly of Rudra, killing him, and then eating him, to put an end to his reign of terror.

In the stomach of the Buddha, Rudra was digested and purified, and eventually emerged from the Buddha's anus a changed being, pledging allegiance to the Buddha. The Buddha gave teachings to Rudra, before finally totally destroying him - liberating him - turning him to 'emptiness,' and then back to 'form' as a protector of the Buddhist teachings.

This then is the core of the liberation rite, the total destruction of someone (spirit, or physical being) so they can remerge as something different.

There is an echo of this in one of the life stories of Padmasambhava, who was said to have 'liberated' some family members because they had 'bad



be anatomically



births' due to their karma, and were suffering - and causing suffering - accordingly.

An early Tibetan Buddhist king, called Langdarma, also suffered this fate, when he became a tyrant and was 'liberated' by a monk. There is also some evidence in some of the Dunhuang manuscripts that the rite was used on people; those who had transgressed Buddhist rules, and were living a 'bad life', therefore needing to be liberated, so as to start again in a better one. The same reasoning was also employed as a reason to execute people - often by dreadfully barbaric methods - in feudal Tibet. Human nature is so often far from pure it would seem.

But for the main part, this rite is practiced to liberate a troublesome spirit, such as the spirit of an illness, or a spirit tormenting someone, or some place - and it is done from a position of compassion - not vengeance.

The rite is done using a substitute for a living being, made generally in the form of a dough doll, or a figure drawn on paper. This substitute representation of a being is called a *linga*.

I have been working with the Tibetan liberation rite - working with a *linga* - adapted to

shamanism for over 20 years. My adaptation keeps the essence of the practice, but removes the more overtly Buddhist aspects. It is one of the key ways I work, and I perform it in different ways, at different times, but always at the instruction of my spirits.

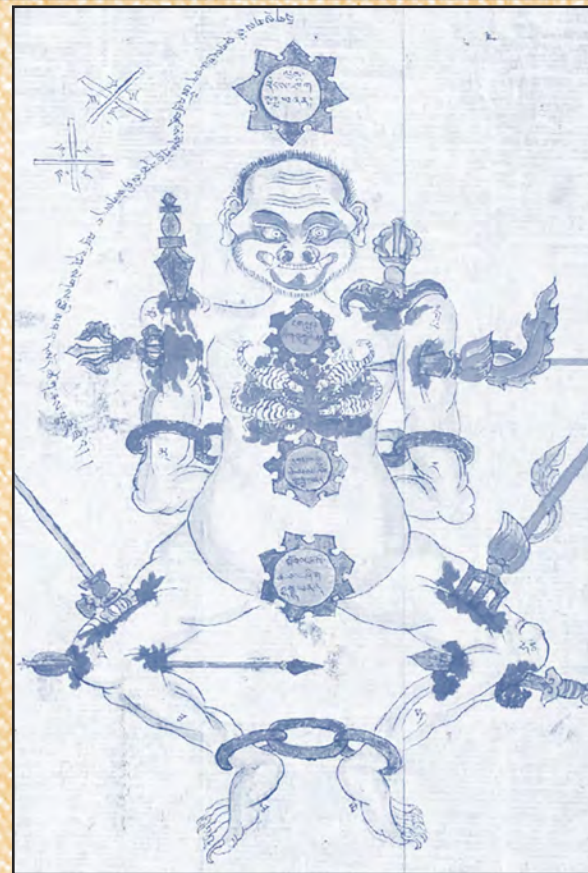
It was one of my spirits who originally taught me the rite, some years before I discovered it had a Tibetan origin; although perhaps this is not so strange, as it was a Tibetan spirit who did the teaching.

A MODERN DAY LIBERATION

I have recently completed a Liberation ceremony, and my spirits - as an aside - suggested I write about it and share it, which is why I am writing this article.

The case I was working with was that of a young pre-pubescent girl with 'life challenges,' who was becoming rather uncontrollable and aggressive. I was asked by her father to 'have a look around' and see if I could see anything going on behind the scenes from a shamanistic point of view.

When I went to my spirits, they showed me an ancestral figure who was manipulating the girl, overshadowing her and causing her to 'act out.' The ancestral spirit had formed an energetic wall all around the girl, closing her off from the



Above: the dough *linga* - complete with turquoise eyes and a coral mouth to help 'awaken' the finished effigy - inside the triangular iron box. *Linga* are symbolic, and do not need to be anatomically accurate

Above Right: a Tibetan paper *linga* showing a spirit chained and punctured by various ritual weapons. Tibetan ritual drawing C19th

Right: a Tibetan paper *linga* showing a spirit chained and pinned down by scorpions. In Tibetan traditions the scorpion is considered very wrathful, and often symbolises a ritual phurba dagger, as it stabs with its sting. Tibetan ritual drawing C19th



Above: one of the author's own phurbas - Tibetan ritual demon killing daggers. Tibet C18th

rest of her family, and holding her attention in an unhelpful way. My spirits told me the only course of action would be to liberate this spirit, as normal, less extreme forms of intervention would not work in this case. And so I set about starting the process for the liberation ceremony.

Tibetan magical ceremonial forms are generally very developed and meticulously worked out, and in keeping with that, the *bsgral-ba* rite has six specific stages. I outlined these in a recent article in Sacred

Hoop about the use of ritual dolls, but I think it is important to share them again here:

- 1] Creating the linga (Tib: 'br)
- 2] Summoning the spirit to go inside the linga (Tib: 'gugs)
- 3] Causing the spirit to be bound into the linga (Tib: *bstims*)
- 4] Separating the spirit from any other protecting spirits looking after it (Tib: *dbyc*)
- 5] Cutting off the spirit's life-force (Tib: *srog-chod*)
- 6] Liberating (killing) the spirit (Tib: *bsgral-ba*)

All of this work was done through the instructions of my spirits, I did what I was told and did not create, from my own thoughts, the form of the ceremony.

Preparation: My spirits told me to bless two pieces of coral and to send them, in the post, to the girl's father. When he received them, he then offered the coral to the girl and told her she could choose one of them to keep. The other piece was sent back to me. The reason for this - as explained to me by my

spirits - was to make the spirit jealous. It would want the coral, and so the piece sent back to me was a lure, bait for a trap.

Creating the linga: Once the piece of coral had arrived back with me, I was told to make a dough doll, with a hole in it where the heart would be. This didn't have to have any special ceremonial making, it just needed to be made in a totally practical, non elaborate way, and so the kitchen was quickly taken over.

Summoning the spirit: Now the linga was made the spirit could be brought to it. This was not going to be straightforward, as the spirit would not be willing, and so the first part of this was to do shamanic work to gain allies, all the spirit helpers who loved me and who wanted to take part to help, and all the spirit helpers of the little girl who loved her and wanted to help her. Once these beings had been asked for their help the actual shamanic work of capturing the tormenting spirit could be performed.

Placing the piece of coral into a silk bag, I placed this bag in the inside of my drum, along with ritual Tibetan iron chains I use. These chains are used in spirit binding rites.

Then, calling upon all those beings who had promised to help, I journeyed to the girl, and there - with the spirit team with me - we surrounded the problematic spirit, and forced it into the coral inside my drum. I then bound it with the iron chains, and came back to the room I was working in.

Binding the spirit to the linga:

The spirit was now back in this world, inside the coral, and it rather felt as if I had captured a hornet in a glass jar. The next job was then to transfer the spirit to the dough linga.

The spirit was potentially dangerous and very hostile, and I knew I had to be careful.

To manage this process I tipped the coral from the bag onto one of the bronze shaman's mirrors I use. The mirror would hold the spirit and because of the nature of shaman's mirrors it meant the hostile spirit was only partially in this world, and partially in the spirit world, stuck between realities and held safely. To be on the safe side however I bound



Left: the iron box containing the 'deceased' dough linga, with soapnut mala, bronze dorje and ritual phurba - within it's stand - on top to 'pin down' and seal the box

it with more iron chains too.

The dough linga was already prepared, having been placed into a ritual Tibetan iron box I have. This is a triangular shaped box with a lid, specifically used for this type of work. In Tibetan traditions a triangle shape is considered wrathful and powerful, and so the shape is used in many 'fierce' ceremonies. Iron, of course is a material universally thought to protect against spirits - that is why an iron horseshoe is placed above a door way - it has nothing to do with luck, it's to keep the spirits outside of your house - because if they get in, well then your luck runs out.

Separating the spirit from its protecting spirits and cutting off its life force:

Using ritual tongs - so I didn't touch the piece of coral - I picked it up from the mirror, and pushed it into the heart cavity in the dough linga. The spirit had now been bound to the linga. I then placed the top on the box.

This meant that the spirit was entombed in a sealed iron spirit trap, cutting off contact with any spirits who wanted to help it, and as it was bound with iron chains inside the iron box, it was immobile, and cut off from its life force and all means of escape. At this point, after the period of intense violent energy while capturing the spirit, and with it safely imprisoned, I now took some time to do some peaceful practice, to build an atmosphere of compassion, reminding myself I was not seeking to 'get' the spirit, instead I was seeking to liberate it, in the best sense of the term.

Liberating the spirit: The final stage was then to liberate the spirit by 'killing' the dough linga. to do this I lifted the top off the iron box and, using Tibetan ritual weapons - a phurba, a sword, a spear and an axe - I ritually killed and dismembered the linga, cutting off it's head, each arm, each leg, and cutting the torso into four parts.

The corpse of the linga was then still inside the iron box, and my spirits had instructed me that it

could remain in there until the next day, as it was now late at night.

So I placed the top back on the iron box and sealed it by binding it in a special set of prayer beads made from the seeds of the soap tree. These seeds are used both by Tibetan Buddhists and Nepalese shamans and are seen as a wrathful object with great protecting properties, so binding the box in a string of them would act as a seal. I also placed a phurba and a dorje on top of the box to act as further seals.

Before I completed the evening, I did more shamanic work to see if I had anything still to tidy up, returning to the girl's room to give it an eye over, noticing what had changed. I was also given instructions to pass on to her father, giving him a simple cleansing ceremony he needed to do daily, for the next ten days.

The next day, the corpse was burned outside in my garden in a ritual fire of wood, with added sacred herbs and incense powder (Tib: bsang) to 'sweeten' the fire.

This is a fairly elaborate ceremony, and quite advanced. I work a great deal with ritual objects and have many of the type used for these sorts of ceremonies in my possession. I also had a very good friend, and highly skilled practitioner of Tibetan shamanism, 'watching my back,' by adding protection for me during the whole liberation process.

It would however, be quite possible to go to your own spirits and ask to receive instruction as to how you might do this form of ceremony when required, and if you did what sort of objects you should obtain, or make yourself.

Should you do a ceremony like this, you need to be scrupulous in your ceremonial tidiness, you need to remember you are dealing with a potentially harmful spirit, and work with it like you might with some dangerous bio-hazard material or toxic nuclear waste.

I also wore full shamanic 'armour' to perform the ceremony, which you could think of as a

Rudra, a one-time great practitioner of Buddhism, gradually became a monstrous demon because he lacked compassion. So, as a way to heal the wound on the earth which Rudra was creating, a Buddha, a being of great compassion, forced a trident into the belly of Rudra, killing him, and then eating him, to put an end to his reign of terror.

shaman's bio-hazard or nuclear protection suit. This ritual armour is literally 'boots and all,' Shaman's ritual clothing is very much protective clothing - it is why shamans wear it, but such ritual armour is a topic for another day.

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NOTES:

1: Emptiness and Form is an essential aspect in tantric Buddhism. Things are seen as moving between the two states, dissolving and reforming, from Emptiness (female) to Form (male). The two states also can be seen as Wisdom (female) and Compassion (male). All things eventually dissolve into Emptiness from Form, and all things are born from Emptiness to become Form.

FURTHER READING:

'The Taming of The Demons: Violence and liberation in Tibetan Buddhism.' Jacob

Left: a Tibetan protective wood block printed amulet, in the form of a scorpion

Below: Tibetan woodblock print of a demon being attacked by a lama with a phurba

