



Phurbas are shamanic 'demon daggers' used widely in Nepal & Tibet for healing and other energy working

Peggy Malnati
Explores their history, symbolism and use

HIMALAYAN THUNDER NAILS



One of the oldest types of 'medicine tools' from the shamanic traditions in the Himalayas is the *phurba* (*phurba* or *phurpa*). Known variously as a demon dagger, magical knife, thunder nail, or diamond spike, this three-sided blade is a powerful ritual implement used by shamans, magicians, tantrikas (tantric practitioners), and lamas of different ethnic backgrounds and spiritual orientations.

Considered the 'centre of the shamanic universe' for practitioners in Nepal's Katmandu Valley, phurbas are widely used among peoples such as the *Tamang*, *Gurung*, and *Newari* Tibeto-Burmese tribes. They are also used by *Sherpas*, and Tibetans living in exile in Nepal (*Bhotyas*) or elsewhere in the world. Hence, these implements are a product of thousands of years' influence by Hinduism, Buddhism, Bon', and the earliest shamanic traditions.

In turn, their power and very existence has forever coloured the religious and spiritual traditions that have absorbed them and made them

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their own symbol.

Phurbas have become more widely known in the West over the past few years and can now even be found for sale with merchants offering various types of historical and fantasy knives, swords, axes, etc.

TOOLS OF TRANSFORMATION

So what exactly is a phurba, what is it made of, what does it symbolise, and how is it used? So powerful a magic do

they represent that phurbas are often used in rites associated with subduing the most malevolent of entities and overcoming the greatest of challenges. These include plagues, pestilence, invasions and wars, drought, famine, and all manner of problem-causing forces.

These forces can be internal - like fear, obsession, depression, an overly active internal dialogue, or emotions that escape the control of the conscious mind - or they can be external entities, mental projections, or damaging psychic fields. Used properly and respectfully, the phurba is a powerful ally that can remove or transform that which inhibits our well-being and spiritual growth.

Actually, the transformative property of the phurba is a subtle but important aspect of its function. By its design, it is able to absorb, transmute and divert negative energies. In shamanic belief systems, such energies cannot be killed or destroyed, as they are an integral aspect of Creation. However, such

energies can be immobilised, then re-directed elsewhere.

Unlike a sword or knife, which essentially cleave things, the phurba can neutralise an energy or obstacle by nailing it down or imprisoning it, thus rendering it incapable of causing further problems.

In the Buddhist worldview, the phurba represents the active, masculine principle, penetrating the heart of the problem, transforming it in a process that can be likened to fighting fire with (enlightened) fire.

CONSTRUCTION

Phurbas are found in various materials and sizes. They may be made of wood, iron, metallic alloys (e.g. brass, bronze, and copper), quartz, or precious metals (sometimes encrusted with jewels). Structurally, they can be freestanding or attached (as a handle) to drums or other objects. They may be as small as an amulet or as large as a staff.

The first items that humans used as phurbas were 'found' objects from the natural world around them, such as plant stalks and animal horns. These earliest phurbas were believed to have been replaced by representations of the original natural forms made of clay.

Himalayan shamans are said to favour wood over other materials because it is easy to work with, plentiful, and affordable - important criteria for practitioners living in remote villages. In many later traditions, iron (especially from meteorites) was a favoured material of construction - at least for blade and inner shaft - because of the metal's widely attributed ability to combat demons.

HISTORY AND MYTH

The roots of spiritual practices using phurbas are very ancient. To a Himalayan shaman, everything approximating a phallic form can be thought of as symbolising a phurba, including the actual shaman. In turn, all phurbas can be traced back to the creator-god Shiva's sacred phallus or lingam, which represents the primal energy of the universe.

The deity most commonly associated with and invoked by the 'thunder nail' is *Dorje Phurba*, whose name means 'Adamantine Dagger' and who represents primordial awareness. In the older Tibetan traditions, he is a wrathful manifestation² of the water element and an important protector who pierces the ignorance that lies at the heart of all anger, hatred, aggression, fear, and pride.

Later Buddhist traditions absorbed *Dorje Phurba*'s attributes and represented him as a wrathful form of *Padmasambava*, the Tantric Buddha who first brought the teachings to Nepal and Tibet. In this form, the phurba's spirit is seen as helping all beings remove the deep-seated blocks that hindered their path to Enlightenment. Hence the phurba came to represent a wrathful form of the compassionate activities that are fundamental to all Buddhas, and to play a central role in meditative practices.

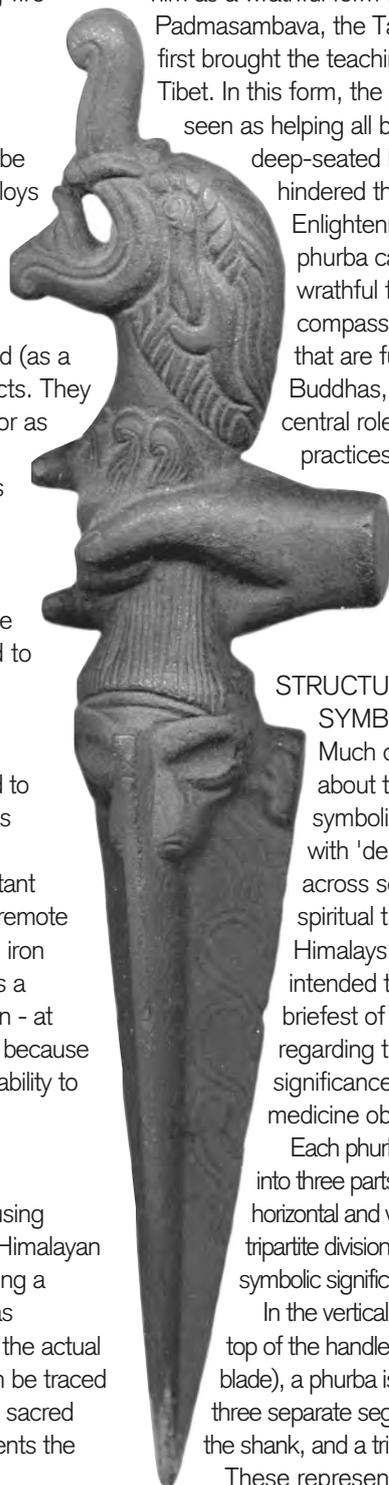
In Nepal *Dorje Phurba* is seen as an important helper spirit for shamans.

STRUCTURAL SYMBOLISM

Much could be written about the densely layered symbolism associated with 'demon daggers' across so many successive spiritual traditions in the Himalays. What follows is intended to provide the briefest of overviews regarding the metaphorical significance of this ancient medicine object.

Each phurba is segmented into three parts on both the horizontal and vertical axis, and this tripartite division has tremendous symbolic significance.

In the vertical axis (i.e. from the top of the handle to the tip of the blade), a phurba is comprised of three separate segments - the head, the shank, and a triangular blade. These represent many things



Uses of the Phurba

Phurbas are used for many important and powerful tasks, including...

- A weapon for subduing and exorcising spirits and demons.
- A meditative tool to pin down the distractions of greed, desire, and envy.
- A means to banish, neutralise, or transform negativity.
- A ritual object to symbolically slay enemies and remove obstacles.
- A therapeutic process for healing physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual dis-ease.
- A vehicle for pinning down the ego, one of the main obstacles to enlightenment.

(see page 14). The top section of the phurba, which offers the greatest design diversity, is usually in the form of the head of a deity. This section, plus other stylistic markers, can provide clues to the cultural group that produced a given ritual tool. For example, phurbas produced by *Kirati* shaman usually feature bird figures, while the *Tamang* use three faces, and Lamas favour a Buddhist chorten³ shape at the top.

In phurbas which show three faces of a deity, these are said to represent the three aspects of the Divine⁴, and the three basic emotions⁵.

When there is only one face present, it is said to represent *Dorje Phurba* himself. The faces often display fearsome expressions to frighten demonic forces and remind humans to consider carefully what requests they put to the gods.

A phurba's middle section or shaft can also differ depending on which religious and ethnic group designed it. In Tantric Buddhism, for instance, this middle section is a *Vajra* - the stylised lightning bolt representing sudden enlightenment or the breaking through of insight.

Symbolism of the Phurba

Phurbas are divided into three sections both vertically and horizontally

VERTICALLY these three sections simultaneously represent each of the following:

- The human body (head - torso - legs).
- The central aspects of Hindu and Buddhist spiritual beliefs.
- The structure of the shamanic universe (Upper World - Middle World - Lower World).

HORIZONTALLY the three sections represent:

- West, Center, East.
- Left eye, third eye, right eye.
- Male, neutral, female.
- Desire, neutrality or indifference, repulsion.
- Past, present, future.

Phurba on the left: the top shows Dorje Phurba and this phurba has a vajra (dorje) shank.

Phurba on the right: at the top is a horse's head identifying it with the deity Hayagreva, who is always portrayed thus. The blade is coming from the mouths of three Makara and is wrapped around by Naga spirits.

HEALING USE

The Sanskrit name for the phurba, *kila*, means nail or wedge, which gives some idea how this medicine tool is actually used. Most practices begin with the practitioner getting centred and inviting the deity represented by the phurba to physically come into the blade. Thus empowered, the practitioner then imagines that he or she is capturing or driving out obstacles by impaling them with the blade.

In shamanic traditions, the practitioner may dance around and wave the demon dagger, eventually capturing the obstacle with one or two phurbas and ramming the energy into the earth.

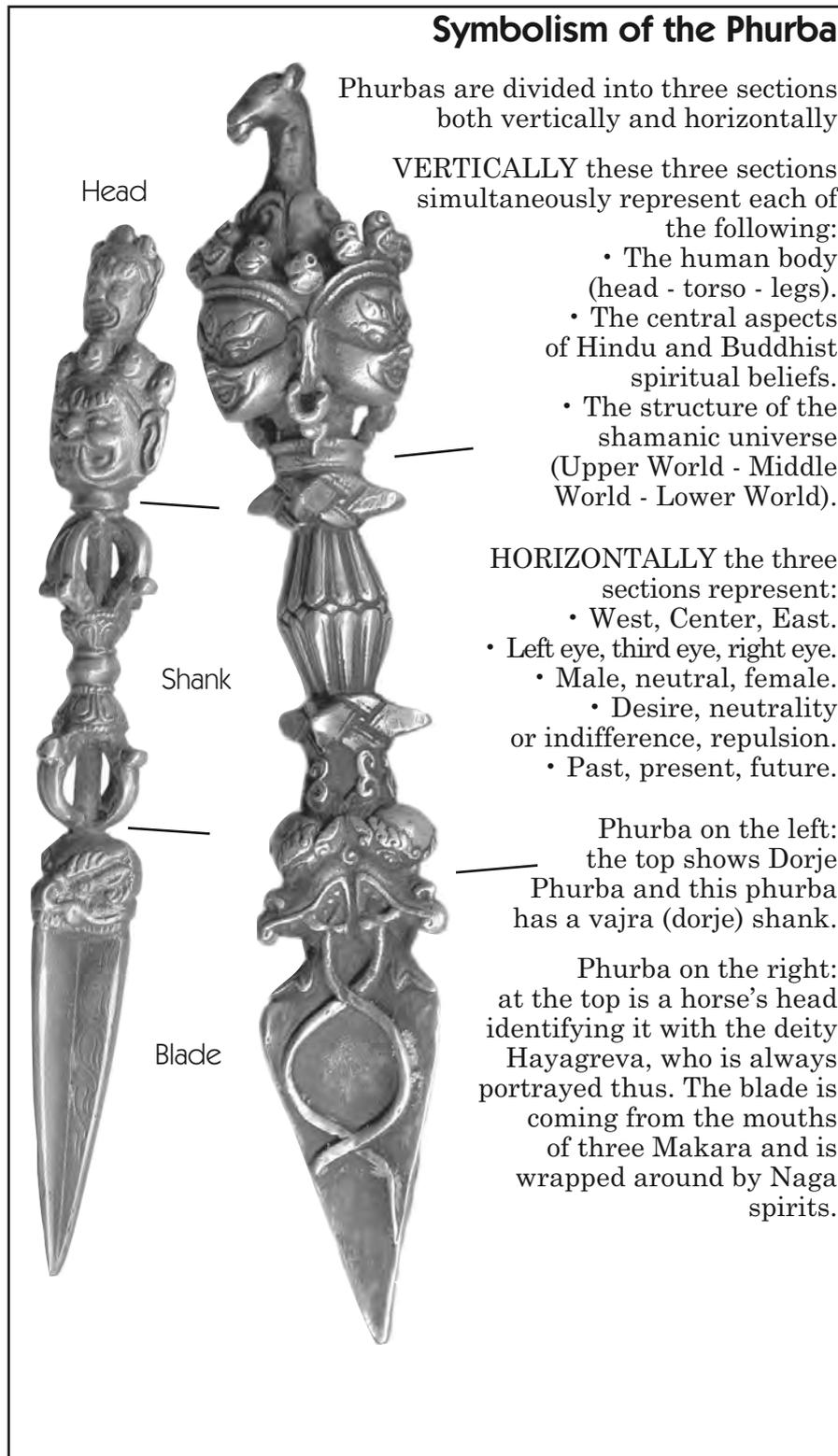
When treating a sick person, the shaman strokes the patient with the phurba, point facing downward, beginning with the head and moving toward the feet. As the shaman touches the parts of the body needing healing with the tip of the blade it attracts and absorbs the ailment. When the phurba reaches the floor, the shaman rams the malevolent forces or obstacles into the earth, pinning and transmuting them.

In the case of exorcisms, the phurba is used to remove the intruding energies, while simultaneously replacing them with healing. The energy being removed can often be trapped in a container or transmuted by the flame of a sacred fire.

In Buddhist traditions, monks performing rituals, either singly or in groups, gesture with the phurba to enforce the effect of mantras (pointing with the phurbas in the directions where the energy should be directed) and to complete ceremonies.

Meditators often hold the phurba while reciting a mantra or liturgy, or imagining an obstacle whose removal is desired. When the obstacle is clearly perceived and understood, the meditator waves or stabs with the phurba as a symbolic threat.

Jhankri shamans visualise the phurba in order to heal, regardless of whether they hold an actual one in their hands. A Kirati shaman explained, "Without the phurba inside himself, the shaman has no consciousness". The shaman *becomes* the phurba and takes on its form to journey shamanically, flying to the other worlds and other realities.



On the bottom section of the phurba lies a blade with three sides and three 'cutting' edges that run together at the tip to form a single point. This triangular blade is said to resemble the old-fashioned nails and tent pegs used by nomadic tribes in the region. The blade's unique structure represents the transformation of Desire, Attachment, and Ignorance, and the destruction of Attachment, Aversion, and Delusion.

The joint of the shaft and blade is often wrapped about by a *Makara* (a mythical water creature) or a *Garuda* (a winged bird-like creature), the blade seeming to spit forth from their mouths. Pairs of *Nagas* (snake spirits) usually twine around the blade, and other symbols such as moons, stars, and triangles can be present. The tip may be reinforced with iron for forceful planting into the earth.

They begin their shamanic journey with their spirit, in the shape of the phurba, leaving their body and travelling to the sacred water container on their altar (*bumpa*). This container is filled with water and in it they meet their helper spirits (often 108, a sacred number).

From the *bumpa* they then fly rapidly to one of the three worlds of the shaman's universe to complete their shamanic mission.

A person who commits to work with the phurba honourably must be willing to invest the effort to create and sustain a spiritual connection with it that connects back to the very power from which the universe was created. Then they can turn a physical object into a powerful instrument for removing obstacles, a vehicle to travel through time and space, and a transformative force to affect true healing.

Peggy Malnati lives in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan; America's Great Lakes State, where she works in industrial communications, is a political activist, caters to her feline masters, and lives on an old farmstead replete with lots of wildlife, trees and magic.

She is also an ordained minister of the church of Tzaddi, a teacher, ceremonialist, spiritual counsellor, and works in several energy-based healing systems. It is important to Peggy to walk softly on this planet.

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(see also advert on page 46 of this issue)

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FINDING YOUR OWN PHURBA:

eBay, the internet auction house is a very good place to find phurbas, new, old and antique. New phurbas can also be obtained from many Tibetan Buddhist centres and shops such as:

In the UK - Garuda Trading.
Tel: (01872) 241 813 www.garudatrading.com

In the USA - Tibetan Spirit.
Tel: (888) 327 2890 www.tibetanspirit.com

NOTES:

- 1: Bon is the original pre-Buddhist shamanic tradition of Tibet. The Bon traditions still exist but have been heavily influenced by later Buddhist ceremonial traditions and artistic expression. (See Sacred Hoop Issue 7).
- 2: A wrathful manifestation is one of the ways compassionate Buddha energy shows itself, the others being Peaceful and Joyous. For more information on these, see the articles on Wrathful, Peaceful and Joyous beings found in the Tibetan traditions in Sacred Hoop Issues 18, 19, 20, & 21.
- 3: A Chorten is a symmetrical monument which represents Buddha awareness.
- 4: Male aspect, female aspect, and gender-neutral aspect.
- 5: In this worldview, all emotions are reduced to three basic values: desire/joy, neutrality/indifference, and repulsion/hate.

PHOTOS:

- PAGE 12: Brass vajra handled phurba tied with a silk streamer.
PAGE 13: An antique Iron Nepalese phurba showing the correct *mudra* (finger position) to hold the phurba with in.
PAGE 14 (left): An old vajra handled copper *Dorje Phurba* Phurba. (Right): An antique Silver *Hayagreva* Phurba.
PAGE 15 (top): Antique Shamans drum with phurba handle.



Page 16: The phurba is taken from the patient's head (top), down their whole body (centre) and finally down to the earth (bottom), the healer using her intent all the time to attach the energy of the illness to it, and finally discharging the illness upon contact into with the ground.
(Bottom of page): an antique iron and bronze phurba tied with red and white silk streamers which represent male and female.

