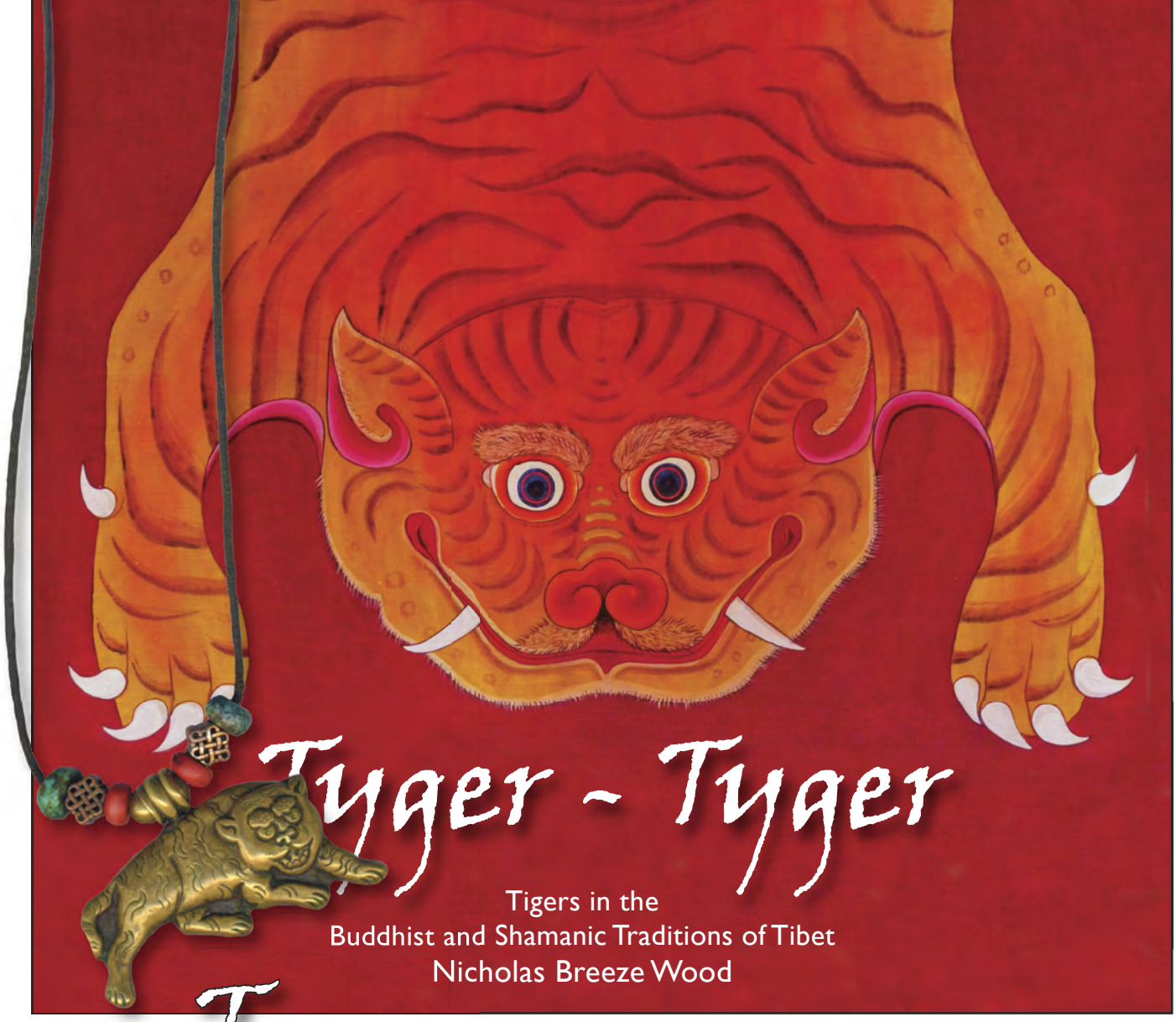


# Tyger - Tyger

## Tigers in the Buddhist and Shamanic Traditions of Tibet

Nicholas Breeze Wood

*Above*: painted tiger on the lid of a trunk

*Inset*: Tibetan tiger amulet

*Below*: Tibetan tiger dancer

Tigers are powerful animals, and a symbol important to many cultures where tigers have lived, or are still living. Historically they ranged over vast areas of Asia - right from the very south, up to the north of the continent - and in this wide spread there are a number of sub-species of this mighty cat.

These sub-species include: the Siberian or Amur Tiger, which lives in Northern China and South Eastern Siberia; the Bengal Tiger, which lives in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan; the Indo-Chinese Tiger, which lives in Cambodia, South West China, Laos, Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam; the Malayan Tiger, which lives in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula; the South China Tiger, which lives in Southern China, and which may now be extinct; and the Sumatran Tiger, which only lives on the island of Sumatra.

In addition to these living sub-species of tiger, there are three other recently extinct sub-species: the Bali Tiger, from the island of Bali - which became extinct in the late 1930's; the Javan Tiger, from the island of Java - which became exstinct in the 1970's', and the Caspian Tiger. It is the Caspian Tiger which lived over the widest range - from Southern Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Syria in the West, through all the countries of Central Asian, such as Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, and across to Turkmenistan, Mongolia and Western China.

This tiger was last seen in the 1970's in Central Asia, and now is presumed extinct, although even nowadays there are occasional sightings of tigers reported in remote parts of eastern Turkey - none of which have been confirmed - however, we live in hope.

It is likely that this tiger was also native to Northern Tibet, close to the Central Asian deserts, but no physical remains of it have been found there to confirm this.

The Caspian tiger is most likely to be your 'ancestral tiger' if you are of white European stock, as many of our ancestors came from

*Left*: front and back view of a C19th Tibetan leather quiver, painted to represent tiger skin rather than actually being made out of tiger skin

the Middle East, from around Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and your ancestors would therefore, almost certainly, have encountered tigers at some point in the past.

In the South of Tibet the Bengal Tiger can be still be found, in very small - but happily, growing numbers - in the high Himalayas which border their homelands of India and Nepal.

Tigers are the very stuff of legends in Tibet. Their skins are an essential part of the costume of the wrathful Tibetan spirit beings, who are depicted in thangka paintings. Many of these Buddhist and Bon - the original pre-Buddhist shamanic traditions of Tibet - beings also ride upon the backs of tigers. Tigers are painted on temple and domestic walls and furniture as both decoration and as sacred protectors. Tiger bones and skins have been used to make ritual objects, as well as having a long and dubious use in traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine.

In Tibetan Buddhist folklore, a tiger bone is believed to bring the rain when it is thrown into a pool or well in which nagas dwell, and a tiger claw is believed to be an extremely potent amulet for the generation of personal power.

Brass and bronze amulets of tigers are worn for personal protection and empowerment; tiger skins are kept in temples as offerings to wrathful protector spirits; high ranking lamas, rinpoches and tantric magicians sit upon them in rituals, and nomads - when they can - often wear tiger or leopard fur trims on their clothes.

All in all, tigers are deeply connected to many aspects of Tibetan ritual and secular life, probably more than any other animal.

The tiger is one of the guardian spirits of the four directions according to Tibetan cosmology, and their fierceness has often meant they are associated with warriorship. Warriors were sometimes described

*Below left*: a Tibetan protector spirit with the body of a serpent-like naga with a tiger's head, riding upon the back of a tiger

*Below*: a Tibetan dancer wearing clothes decorated with leopard skin instead of tiger

*Right*: a thangka painting of Padmasambhava riding on a tiger who is actually his consort Yeshe Tsogyal.
The pair are travelling to Taktsang in Bhutan to subjugate a local demoness. Once there, Padmasambhava vanquished the demoness, and then entered a retreat in the cave

*Inset top*: an antique copper Tibetan protection amulet in the form of a snow leopard

*Inset bottom*: 'tiger tooth' dZi stone bead amulet

*Right*: a thangka painting of a Mongol leading a tiger.
This is a painting with two meanings. The first interpretation represents three important Bodhisattvas.

Its second meaning is more political, as it symbolises the supremacy of the yellow-hatted Gelugpa school (represented by the Mongol) over the older 'red-hatted' schools, represented by the tiger

as 'conquering male tigers in their prime' - *skyes-pa stak-'gugs* - and the proud swagger of a warrior, known as the 'tiger's gait' - *stak-'gros* - was later adopted as a sort of dance step used in wrathful rituals. Warriors often used a quiver of arrows made of tiger skin, a coat trimmed with tiger fur was awarded to brave warriors - who were called 'tiger-dress hero' - *dpa'-bo tak-chas*; and in both ancient Buddhist and Bon traditions, tiger fur was seen an insignia of distinction for powerful magicans and yogis.

Wrathful Tibetan deities generally wear a loincloth made of a flayed tiger skin, and the same can be said for both mountain spirits, and the male dakas - the spirits of the Earth.

Many Tibetan deities - especially the wrathful protectors - have large entourages, which are made up of other spirits. These will often include either tigers, or half-human, half-tiger beings, generally with a human-like body and a tiger's head.

In Tibetan symbolism, the tiger's phallic-like stripes, means that they often represent maleness, whereas the spots of a leopard, which resemble vaginas, often represent femaleness. This is why tiger skins are worn more by wrathful male beings, and leopard skins are worn more by the female dakinis - female sprites or fairies found in Tibetan cosmology, or by wrathful goddesses.

Tigers also appear as spirit helpers for some Tibetan shamans, and according to Tibetan tradition, people and deities often have what they call 'soul-force animals' - which we might call 'spirit animal helpers' - which serve as protectors. Tigers are seen as important and powerful spirit animals to have, and the tiger spirit helper of a shaman is said to be able to assist in healing a wide range of illness and problems, afflicting both humans and livestock.

Ledgendary, historic, tantric practitioners, magicians and shamans were supposed to have kept animals such as tigers and leopards, in the same way that other people kept goats, sheep and dogs. They were also said to have been able to shape-shift into these animals when needed, in order to perform magical acts.

Padmasambhava, the C8th tantric magician who is credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet, is said to have ridden on the back of a tiger - and in some accounts this tiger was his consort, Yeshe Tsogyal, who had shape-shifted in order to carry him.

There are also ancient stories from the region about a divine couple who shape-shifted into tigers, so as to mate and conceive a powerful king, or clan leader. The warrior leaders of clans were sometimes said to appear as tigers, which gave rise to several ancient Tibetan clans having totemic tigers as their symbols. The Buddhist victory banner - *rgyal mtshan* - is sometimes made from, or decorated with, a tiger skin, or cloth that represents a tiger skin.

The 'divine tiger' is also still called upon by shamans and lamas to attract good luck to people who have suffered misfortune, sometimes an actual tiger's skin being used in the rituals.

Amulets of tigers - in some form or another - are very popular. These may be made from metal, but are also found in the form of dZi stones which represent tiger teeth. These stone beads are made out of agate, which has been marked by chemical methods to create patterns. They are very ancient beads, with a history stretching around 3,000 years, and 'true dZi' (old ones)

are very rare, and highly valuable, selling for as much as a million US dollars each. Modern dZi beads are far cheaper, and made of the same material, with the old patterns.

Amber is associated in Tibet with tigers too. Historically amber was obtained from either the Baltic - traded on protracted routes across Europe and Asia - or from Yunnan province in 'China. Its Chinese name is *hu p'o*, which means 'tiger's spirit', and this name comes from a belief that the spirit of a dead tiger enters the ground and transforms itself into amber.

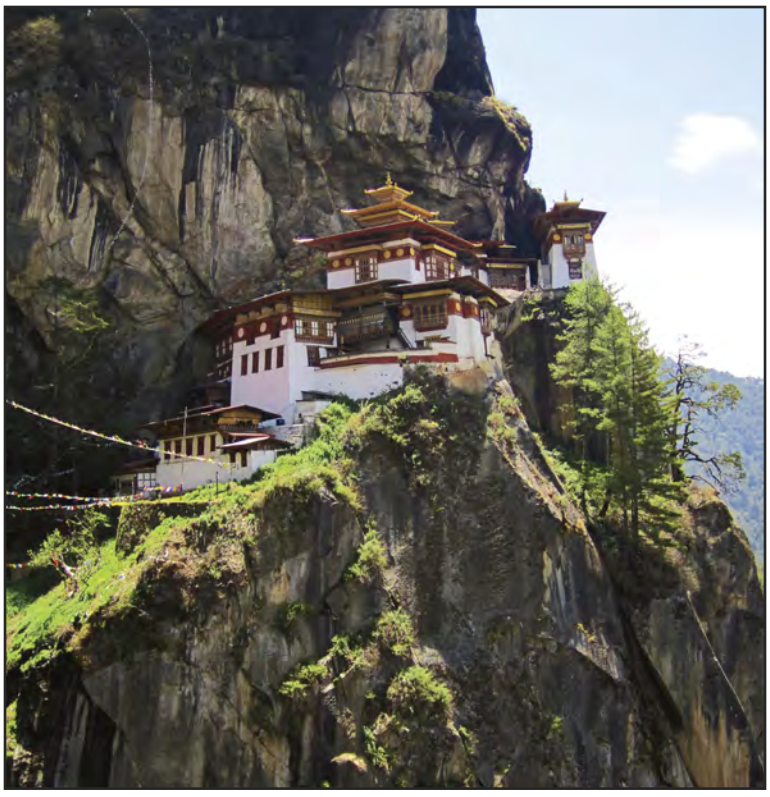
There are many places in and around Tibet that take their names from tigers. The most famous of these is Tiger's Nest - Taktsang - in Bhutan, to which British Royals recently made a visit. Taktsang is a small monastery, perched precariously upon a ledge on high cliffs, and it gets its name from a legend that Padmasambhava flew there on the back of a tiger to enter a retreat in a cave there. The monastery is built over this cave, and the cave is still used for retreats.

Other tiger places in Tibet include Tiger God Fortress - *Tak-lha mkhar* - an ancient fortress said to pre-date Buddhism, once part of the Central Asian, pre-Buddhist shamanic superstate, called Zhang Zhung - of which Tibet was a province. There is a sacred gorge, complete with geysers, called *Tak rong*, which is associated with the ancient Bon tradition, and there are several Tiger Valleys and at least one Tiger Mountain, the powerful spirit of which comes into the bodies of local shamans when they go into trance.

Within Central and Northern Tibet, ancient rock art depicting tigers can be found. These tend to date to between about 600-100BCE, so are only some 2,500 years old.

Some of the very oldest Tibetan texts mention ritual musical instruments made from tiger remains. The tiger skin would have been used to make drums, and some shamans in Nepal - even until quite recent times - used tiger skin for this purpose.

Tiger bones would have been made into ritual trumpets called *taklings,* which are similar to the Tibetan human thighbone trumpets, called *kanglings*. As they are associated with the most wrathful of spirit beings, a tiger bone trumpet is considered to be very powerful.



*Left*: Taktsang - Tiger's Nest - Monastery in Bhutan

*Below*: tiger petroglyph in the North of Tibet

*Bottom*: tiger thighbone *takling* trumpet, used in rituals. It has a skin covering at the knuckle end, and silver decoration, set with red coral and turquoise

Today tigers are, quite rightly, a fiercely protected species, but this was not always the case. Before the British conquered India between the C18th - C19th, tigers were plentiful, as they were in the vast cold lands of Siberia before the Russians ventured east around the same time.

Tigers were always hunted, often from self defence, but they were also respected as sacred animals by the local population. However, the rifles of the British Raj and the Russians decimated the population of the tigers worldwide, and had a far more of a disastrous effect on their numbers than Tibetans armed with bows and arrows. The pelts hunted as sport quickly became British fireside rugs, and their heads became snarling stuffed trophies to be hung on a wall.

In Tibet, until quite recently, tigers were still hunted if they were a problem to local villagers, although this is now dying out, due mainly to ecological education.

When a tiger is killed in Tibet, because it was such a powerful and sacred animal, its pelt and bones are often given to a local

*Above*: Tibetan wooden trunk with an inset panel of tiger skin

*Above right*: contemporary tiger rug cushion made by Tibetan refugees in Nepal

monastery, where it can be used for sacred craftwork, or used as an offering to the wrathful protectors.

Before hunting controls, tiger skins were incorporated into furniture - set into panels on the front or top of pieces, although very often, instead of fur, these panels were painted to represent tiger stripes.

But perhaps the main use of a tiger pelt in Tibet was as a ceremonial rug. Shamans and tantric practitioners greatly prized these and sought them out to sit or stand upon while they performed, practiced or undertook rituals and ceremonies.

Practitioners generally sat on two types of rugs - depending on their spiritual practice. If they were engaged in peaceful practices - such as those devoted to peaceful gods and beings, like Tara, or the historic Buddha - a practitioner would generally sit on either a Chinese carpet, or a deer skin.

But if the tantric practitioner was engaged in a wrathful, or violent practice, with beings such as Mahakala, Ekijati, or Dorje Drolö - a wrathful manfestation of Padmasambhava who is always shown riding a tiger - then a tiger skin would be employed if at all possible.

As a substitute for the rapidly declining genuine tiger skins, and as an act of conservation, woollen rugs, which had always been popular in Tibet, began to be created. These were made with designs inspired by actual tiger skins.

Rug making has a long history in Central Asia, which is where rugs were first made - some two

thousand years ago. In Tibet, rugs from Central Asia and China, as well as Tibet's own, home-produced rugs, have long been treasured. Many Tibetan rugs have tantric or magical designs on them, and these new rugs, generally called 'tiger rugs,' became an important aspect of both sacred and domestic carpet weaving.

These tiger-patterned small carpets have increased in popularity, both in Tibet and the West since they were first made, and are now sought out by Western collectors and interior designers.

Today, high quality rugs are made by Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India, and low quality ones are made in factories in China. Recently I even came across (and bought) a washable mass-produced bathroom shower rug with a Tibetan Tiger rug design - a sign they have really entered the mainstream.

Tiger rugs vary both in design and form. Some are quite abstract, with just a series of stripes, often with stylised rainbows at the ends; others represent whole skins, laid out on the floor; some are more pictorial, showing actual tigers on rocks or beside trees. The shape of most of these rugs are rectangular, but in

*Right*: Dorje Drolö, a wrathful form of Padmasmbhava, riding upon a pregnant tigress. Padmasmabhava shape-shifted into this form at the cave of Taktsang - Tiger's Nest - in Bhutan, in order to magically vanquish a demoness who lived in the area

*Far right*: a painted canvas tiger skin from a Tibetan Monastry

recent years a new form of rug which follows the actual outline of a flayed tiger skin, have become more popular.

It is also possible to buy small square rugs, with a striped design, on which to meditate, and high quality (and high cost) cushion sets for your favourite sofa - thereby supporting Tibetan exiles by helping to keep their culture alive, and generating some much needed money.

Woollen tiger rugs are now considered equally as auspicious as actual tiger skins - and much more ethical. It is said that the dakini are attracted both to actual tiger skins and to well-made tiger rugs, and they come around a practitioner and bless and empower their work when the practitoner 'rides the tiger.'

The tiger is a magnificant animal, and has become somewhat of a symbol for conservation work over recent years. Real, old skins are still around - the tigers shot when it was legal to do, and tiger parts dating to before 1947, are perfectly legal to buy, sell and own. Personally, I think it is morally alright to use these old skins, as to destroy an old skin seems to me to add an even greater disrespect to the tiger.

However, it is in no way condonable to hunt tigers nowadays, and old skins - which are, thankfully, an ever decreasing commodity, are very expensive - well outside of the average budget. Although, if tiger wants to dance with you, there is no end to the possibilities of what might manifest.

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*Above left*: a Tibetan official sits upon a tiger skin. Photo 1937

*Above*: a Buddhist monk with a tiger skin offering to the wrathful protectors in a monastery

*Right*: two Tibetan tiger rugs one naturalistic and the other more abstract in design

*Below*: Tibetan wooden trunk painted with a tiger design