

## THE PHURBA AND A HYPOTHESIS ON ITS ORIGINS

The origins of the phurba are shrouded in mystery. However, there are several points of reference, which may allow us to perceive the sources of its possible origin amongst the numerous hypotheses put forward.

Given the name phurba in Tibetan and Kila in Sanskrit, amongst its various functions there is one that is constant: to restrain evil and harmful occult forces.

There are many references and texts relating to the phurba. We have chosen from them, a few, which seemed to us particularly significant.

Firstly, one finds the tent peg, which seems to represent its most archaic form, was not only used to pin down tents but also to restrain the evil forces capable of disrupting the life of the Nomads and their principle activity, hunting. The importance of the role which shamanism played in their daily lives, particularly in the hunting of game, is well known.

Certain Nepalese phurba, made from iron or bronze have clearly had this function: their head split or twisted resulting from them being forced into the ground by the blows of a sledgehammer.

The Samoyed people call the Pole Star - which attaches the celestial tent like a stake - "the sky nail", whereas the Chukchi and the Koryaks name it "the star nail". The tent stake is likened to the sky pillar by the Tatars of Altai, the Buryats and the Soyots. The edification of the first great cities of antiquity hasn't modified this conception merely adapted it. One finds In Mesopotamia foundation nails and figurines.

G. Contenau, in his manual of oriental archaeology gives a precise account, when he speaks about copper nails:

"Driven into the earth of the foundations, these nails constitute a protection against the invasion of evil spirits; those spirits being cited are not able to penetrate into the dwelling through the ground; being chased away by the sharp points of the nails.

The sheathed statues possessing this form were probably considered as talismans."

In his book on the Sumer civilisation, André Parrot makes the same observations:

"All these figures have the same thing in common; they almost always end in a point and this is no simple coincidence: the point has an efficient virtue, particularly important in the construction of foundations where one endeavours to nail to the ground all the evil forces, in order to prevent them from harming the occupants or the owners of the building. The construction of all buildings and edifices was a serious act that risked, if one wasn't careful, of unleashing dark forces. The Mesopotamians throughout history buried their statues and figurines at the corners of monuments, under doorsteps. It was far better to abide by these substitutions than to sacrifice a newborn child as was done in Jericho by Hiel de Bethel.

In the year 331 B.C. Livy recounted the appearance in Rome of a serious problem, which would require the appointment of a dictator to perform the ceremony of the 'driving in of the nail'.

Salomon Reinach in his article "The ordeal of the poison at Rome and the bacchanalia affair" relates this event in citing the text of a roman historian:

"In referring to the annals (*memoria ex annalibus repetita*), one finds that in ancient times, during periods of discontent amongst the people, the dictator would 'drive in the nail' and this ceremony of atonement would return the spirits - that had been lost through the discord - back to the people. It was then that one could nominate a dictator..." and carries on in writing: "In reality, after this crisis of witchcraft and the execution of alleged witches, it was believed necessary to disperse the presence of this threatening evil magic, by the ceremony of 'the driving in of the nail'."

Tree trunks covered with nails in front of certain churches could be the remains of this tradition, coming more or less, from the same belief.

Further to the east, and more recently than this Roman ritual and within a Buddhist context, one can equally find traces of the same tradition that places a fixing nail in the foundations;

During our exhibition on the dance of the dead, we presented a stupa made from rock crystal, originating from Pakistan in the Gandhara style and dating from the 1st or 2nd century. The working of the rock crystal is probably of Indian origin.

This stupa had been buried, surrounded by vegetation and protected by a piece of pottery, in the substructure of a sanctuary. It was decorated with added features in gold, of local origin but with Greek influences.

In its hollow base was placed a round gold box with a domed lid. This box contained diverse devotional objects, essentially made from rock crystal and in particular an object in the form of a phurba, measuring no more than a centimetre, but seeming to have had the same function as the foundation nails of Mesopotamia.

During his journey to Do-ring, the tibetologist Georges de Roerich states:

"At the place called Do-ring, (Do-ring means "long stone"), about thirty miles to the south of Pangong tsho-tcha the great salt lake, we found a substantial alignment of 18 rows of stone slabs placed upright. Each of these alignments was orientated from the east to the west and terminated at its western end in a 'cromlech' or stone circle consisting of several standing stones laid out in a more or less perfect circle. In the interior of the circle there stood several roughly shaped standing stones or 'obelisks' planted in the ground, in front of which rose up a coarsely hewn stone table or alter. This was evidently a sanctuary of a primitive culture. But what era does it come from? What was its use? If one compares the famous megalithic monuments of Carnac in Brittany, with the megaliths discovered in Tibet, one is immediately struck by the remarkable similarities between these two groups of monuments. The monuments at Carnac are orientated from the east to the west and have at their western limits a cromlech or stone circle. The monuments of Do-ring have precisely the same disposition. To this day, the religious function of the monuments at Carnac remains unknown, in spite of the numerous theories put forward. It seems to me that the arrangement of the megaliths of northern Tibet could supply us with some clues.

At the eastern limits of the Do-ring monument we find, placed upright on stone slabs, a large arrow, also in stone, with the arrow head turned towards the alignment. In the ancient nature cult of Tibet, the arrow is an important symbol linked to the cult of the sun and sky fire appearing as a flash of lightning, which it symbolises. Today's nomads carry in the guise of

ancient amulets copper arrowheads said to represent, a terrifying bolt of lightning at the moment it touches the earth. The presence of this arrow at the eastern limits of the Do-ring monuments clearly indicates that its entire construction was dedicated to nature cults.”

A.W Macdonald has voiced reserves on the similarities with the alignments with Carnac and Madame Ruskin refers to the fact that they are from a different era and brings attention to the absence of the “arrow” motif in the different alignments at Carnac and other nearby sites.

However, in observing this “arrow” motif more closely we see that it has, by its structure, a striking resemblance to a phurba rather than an arrow - It is impossible to shoot an arrow with such a bulge at the opposite end of its point. In fact, it resembles far closely the pommel of a phurba, which is often sculpted with three faces.

If this is the case, what conclusions can be made?

All these erect stones must have served as an axis mundi, a link between the underworld, the earth and the sky, and between the dead and the living. Also, they would have been destined to receive cosmic energy.

One could ask the question if the creators of this gigantic structure, as for the phurba, had not merely intended to capture and canalise the forces and the energies used by priests in particular rituals and sacrifices but intended it to be used on a scale of exceptional importance.

This possible link between the wooden Shamanic phurba and this “megalithic phurba” recalls a text by professor Stein:

“If a stone is long-lived, the pine tree is no less gifted with this faculty. The pine tree and the stone are of the same essence and are inseparable...according to the Po-wou-tche the pine tree is, essentially, the essence of the stone. When stones crumble and fall into dust, the pine trees grow. (Inversely), after 3 thousand years, the pine trees are transformed and turned back into stone.”

He comes back to this point several times, in particular:

“That there is no essential difference between a stone and a tree: a tree trunk turns to stone (bois d’aigle) and stones appear out of the earth like plants”.

Or

“Cadières is mistaken, in my opinion, in wishing to establish distinct categories between the various examples of tree and stone cults and to explain them independently from each other. The facts that we have just seen show to the contrary, from a religious or mythical point of view, that there is no essential difference between a tree and a stone”.

“Mountains are often referred to as ‘pillars of the sky’, but they are also known as ‘nails of the earth’ (sa-yi phurba). If there is no mountain an erect stone can have the same function. The pillar in front of the “cathedral” of Lhasa (le jo-khan) is called “long stone, pillar of the sky” whereas another “short stone” is the “navel of the earth”. In bSam-yas, in preparation for the construction of this temple, the ground is consecrated by driving into the ground an iron nail: when it will be completely buried under the earth, it will be the sign

of the end of time. Without doubt, this image comes from the Indian Buddhist tradition (widespread through China).”

It was thus, that Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, at the invitation of king Trisongdetsen and the abbot Bodhisattva Shantarakshita, planted an iron nail and put an end to the hostilities of

the local deities, irritated by the building of a monastery. Now, Padmasambhava was born to the west of India, in the kingdom of Oddiyana and had stayed in India, Nepal and then in Bhutan before coming to Tibet in the middle of the 8th century, if one is to believe his very romanticised and often contradictory biography. Nevertheless, his religious and spiritual culture was essentially Indian.

A manuscript by Touen-houang confirms the Indian origin of the phurba, brought by Padmasambhava

In order to pacify the ground, text of Nyingma origin, meaning the “ancients” a religious order of which Guru Rinpoche was the founder or, at least its inspirer.

To come back to these objects having the same symbolic value, Doctor J. Boulnois indicated in his writings that for the majority of the Dravidian people, inhabitants of southern India, stones (as well as trees) hold in place both good and evil spirits.

These interchangeable objects, could lead us to pose the question: What if the shaman’s wooden phurba was but a substitute for the one in stone set up in the megalithic era? As does the svaru, serve as a mobile substitute for the sacrificial Vedic pole - being chips of wood cut from the tree trunk from which the pole has been carved. And what powers does it represent. Does it delegate to its wielder a very small part of its magic powers? Or on the other hand, is it more of a status symbol for the person carrying it?

It is difficult to conceive that the megalithic stone structure is a prototype for this model. It can only possibly be a stage within an evolution, of which we know so little. However, it is probable that there was originally an object, probably ritual, which could be the ancestor of the phurba as used by the Nepalese shaman and it is probable that this line of questioning will reveal some answers.

In his time, R. Heine-Geldern, had compared the complexities of the megalithic era with certain “mystic” movements, such as Tantrism.

If this theory was confirmed, it would be necessary to eliminate all possible Buddhist influences concerning the origin of the phurba. This can only be done through the observation of certain iconographic details.

Another element could back up this theory.

We have seen, in the context of shamanic sanctuaries in western Nepal, the presence of the god Masta, son of Indra, king of the gods.

Also, a certain number of comparisons can be made between the legend of Indra and the powers and ritual objects of shaman. The principle adversaries of Indra are sorcerers, whose weapon is “black magic”, evil spirits that disturb the sacrifice. He is notably reputed to be a magician and to fight against evil spirits.

He is lord of the weather and of storms. He sends lightening, rain and thunder and is therefore, lord of fertility. His principle weapons are the vajra, “thunderbolt-diamond” and the bow Vijaya.

The etymology of vajra can lead to confusion.

Mireille Helfer has brought a certain amount of clarity to the comparisons that can be made between wood and stone.

Concerning the naming of the vajra, the Tibetans have adopted the translation *rdo-rje* – lord of stones –, which refers to the solidity and incorruptibility of diamonds. Westerners, for their part, have seen a kind of ritual sceptre which they have associated with the thunderbolt of Jupiter, hence the expression “thunderbolt-diamond”.

These different elements bring us back to a set of symbols where an object and the representations of that object combine; lightning and Jupiter’s thunderbolt with stone and thunderstone - this being hewn flint, found on the ground and believed to have been brought there by lightning. It is deemed to possess the same powers as the metal arrowheads - of similar mythical origin - that are used by shaman. These arrows when shot into the air by the shaman are believed to make it rain. They are also attributed with the possibility to control hail and storms, not only in summoning them but also in stopping them. Bows and arrows figure often on the motifs engraved on shamanic ritual objects.

The vajra is a central element of the phurba and the dyangro.

One of the most important myths concerning Indra is his battle with Vritra a huge serpent who stole all the water in the world. Indra smashed his skull with his vajra and brought all the water back to earth.

At the base of the triangular blade of the phurba one finds, in a majority of cases the representation of a Makara, a monster half crocodile and half elephant, related to the element of water.

Professor Stein mentions in his article, The jaws of the Makara, “the makara is insatiable (never satiated from swallowing the waters of the four oceans)...”

One could make the supposition that the central structure of the phurba, the vajra positioned vertically above the skull of the makara recalls the myth of Indra freeing the waters of the earth and killing Vritra.

In the myth of the eternal homecoming, Micea Eliade refers to a text by Mrs M. Sinclair Stevenson from 1920 treating the subject of “centre”, the archetypal sacred zone. This text gives very interesting precisions on the construction of houses in India and their related symbolic meaning:

“In India before placing a single stone...the astrologer indicates the point where the foundations are above the snake which supports the world. The master builder fashions a stake from the wood of a Khadira tree, and with the use of a coconut drives it into the ground, exactly at the designated spot, in order to pin down the head of the serpent”.

He continues with this commentary:

A foundation stone is placed above the stake. The cornerstone thus finds itself exactly at the “centre of the world”. However, the act of placing the stone is also a re-enacting of the cosmological drama, as “pinning down” or the driving in of the stake into the head of the

serpent, imitates the primordial act of Soma or of Indra, when he struck down the serpent in his lair.

In this case, perhaps we should consider Indra as having been a sort of shaman of great renown, possessing far-reaching powers and who, according to the theories of Euhemerus (Greek mythographer at the court of Cassander) would have been human, it being his contemporaries who raised him up to the status of a divinity.

Bernard Sergent, in the conclusion of his chapter on the formation of culture wrote:

“However, this wouldn’t be by an action of the masses, of a level of society overwhelming its conquerors that the ideas of eastern Asia would have penetrated into India, discreetly, at first, in the Vedas and then abundantly: Vedic priests could have been seduced by the shamans of ancient Munda and of the peoples close to the Himalayas with whom they traded. One imagines that through the extensive conversations they exchanged, a large number of their ideas would have been adopted”.

In 1898, Sylvain Lévi, having observed that India’s history was only preserved in its frontier zones, such as Nepal, made the journey to Kathmandu in particular severe conditions, to collect manuscripts, pillar rubbings... in order to complete the missing elements of her studies. (‘Nepal’ - a monumental work, which was of great value to us.)

If the isolation of Nepal, linked to its unique geographical, historical and political context has permitted the conservation of these traditions, could one not think that all the shamanic traditions that are found in these mountains are equally the remnants of very ancient local or Indian traditions, thus bringing us to a turning point in our thinking, that through the structure of the Nepalese shamanic phurba we find what has influenced the conception of the Lamaist phurba and not the contrary?

We conclude with a text by Mircea Eliade concerning the survival of shamanic themes and techniques within Buddhism and Lamaism:

“Perhaps [survival] doesn’t express clearly enough the true state of affairs; it would be better to speak of a revaluing of the ancient shamanic motifs and their integration in a system of ascetic theology where their very nature has undergone a radical modification”.

## **RITUAL DAGGERS OF THE LAMAS AND SHAMEN OF THE HIMALAYAS**

By Jean- Christophe Kovacs

The Phurba represent one of the most emblematic and remarkable ritual objects produced by Himalayan culture. In spite of their relatively modest size, and the majority of pieces sharing a basic common structure, the Phurba are of an immense iconographic richness and astounding diversity. Due to the quality of the carving they are considered as true works of art, for many years now, they have been sort after and admired by museums and collectors from such diverse fields of interest as 'tribal art' to Asian 'classical art'.

Unlike the Buddhist Phurba which have been the object of particular study. The daggers used by the Nepalese Shaman, the priests of the ancient Bonpo religion and the Buddhist lamas living within tribal populations, have not created the same amount of interest, even though, during recent years, a certain number of these objects have been on display at exhibitions. We can quickly distinguish two types of Phurba according to their origin and their stylistic and iconographic characteristics, "classical" Buddhist objects and "Shamanic" daggers. The first of these are used by Lamaist monks and priests throughout the whole arc of the Himalayas and from Tibet to Mongolia, whereas the "Shamanic" daggers seem to originate specifically from the tribal regions of Nepal and from the Sikkim. However, there exist all kinds of variations between these two poles. Certain objects of Buddhist iconography also contain more 'tribal' elements of Hindu and Shamanic inspiration. This situation is essentially found in Nepal, within the areas of contact between the two cultures, and is easily explained by the merging of the old Shamanic ways, which are still active, with Buddhist religious practices more or less formerly integrated by the cultures concerned.

If one is to be more precise in regard to these two types of Phurba, one cannot, due to the lack of sufficient information, classify the Phurba made by the Newars of the Kathmandu valley. However, there is no doubt whatsoever that a study of these objects would bring about a deeper understanding of their origin, the Kathmandu valley being a privileged refuge zone for certain Hindu and Buddhist religious practices having disappeared from India after the Muslim invasions of the 12th century. This territory equally constitutes an autonomous religious centre, having given birth to syncretic religious forms, associating the rituals of Shivaism and Tantric Buddhism.

### **A CONTROVERSIAL ORIGIN**

The Tibetan word Phurba has been translated in various ways but the terms of dagger or ritual dagger are the most usual. The Phurba are of controversial origin. They could be derived from the Indian Kila (literally nail) mentioned in the Rig-Veda, 'to know the songs' in which it is associated with Indra the god of war and thunder, but curiously there is no record of a similar ancient Indian object.

However, as has been demonstrated on numerous occasions, the influence of Hinduism and more precisely that of Tantric Shivaism on Buddhism is considerable, numerous deities and cult objects having been 'recycled' by the ascending religion. However that may be, the usage of ritual daggers is attested by Indian Buddhist texts dating from 600 and 900 and by a text discovered ten years ago in a stupa in the city of Gilgit (in Baltistan, Kashmir. A northern area of Pakistan) dating back to the 5th century.

According to tradition this object would have been brought to Tibet by the great Buddhist master Padmasambhava around 747 - he himself having been initiated by the Indian sage Prabhastin. An ancient Tibetan manuscript (9-10th century) found at Dunhuang (Chinese

province of Gansu) mentioned that Padmasambhava introduced the use of the Phurba during the course of his tantric teachings dedicated to Dorje Phurba (Vajrakilaya in Sanskrit). However, various modern authors distance themselves from this tradition and think that the Phurba could have a purely Tibetan or Shamanic origin – descriptions of the Phurba, have been found in the texts of the ‘pre-Buddhist’ Bonpo religion. How these two religions have influenced each other, is as yet unknown.

## A CODIFIED STRUCTURE YET OPEN TO A VARIETY OF REPRESENTATIONS

The Phurba exist in great diversity. This is due to the fact that they have been in existence for over a millennium, and extend over a large expanse of territory. They are produced in a large variety of workshops and have many varied uses and styles. They are composed of three parts: the blade, ‘the body’ and ‘the head’. Each basic element has many different meanings according to its religious group, the context within which they are used and especially of the level of interpretation chosen, which is reputed to allow several degrees: exterior, interior and secret.

## THE PHURBA OF BUDDHIST ORIGIN

The blade generally has a triangular form comprising of three sides (triple blade), on which are representations of snakes (naga in Sanskrit, klu in Tibetan) either on their own or entwined in pairs. They have the power to make it rain and are the guardians of water, the underworld and treasure. The blade bursts forth from the jaws of a water dragon. A monster, half crocodile and half elephant, reputed to have originated in the sea (called makara in Sanskrit, chu-srin in Tibetan). Sometimes the makara is replaced by a geometric figure or by another animal such as the mythical bird garuda (khyung in Tibetan), the mortal enemy of the naga and protector against illness.

The body is most often a handle representing or evoking the shape of a “thunderbolt-diamond” (vajra in Sanskrit rdo-rje in Tibetan) but this can be replaced by an object of polyhedral form that is sometimes decorated with stylised lotus leaves. This element symbolises the power and strength of the doctrines and practices of tantric Buddhism. The vajra or object is held in place by ‘eternal knots’ (equally called ‘Chinese knots’, rgya-mdud in Tibetan) of diverse forms, balls or tetrahedrons... these imitate the cloth knots used to hold the “incandescent weapon” and on another level are a symbol of longevity and of the cycle of rebirth.

The head is of various forms according to the deity represented. The most common form is that of three identical faces, one peaceful (parted lips), one joyful (teeth visible) and one wrathful (tongue showing). The three faces symbolise the three bodies of Buddha or the victory over the three poisons (ignorance, desire, and hate). The faces are generally grouped together under a communal headdress and the phurba is completed by a knot at the top of the head, a half-vajra, or an attribute of the deity represented (the bird Kyung, or the head of Hayagriva’s horse...) or a ring. In certain cases, the three faces are replaced by the head of an animal (bird, bull, dog, snake...) In general these are representations of minor deities, considered as guardians of the tantric way or vehicle. These daggers would be stuck in the ground to mark the place for the composition of mandalas.

Finally, several Buddhist phurba represent particular deities (Vajrakilaya in his winged form, Dorje Drolo...) and divert from the basic structure previously described in order to show the

divinity half-length in various positions (hands joined, with or without attributes), the legs being replaced by the blade.

## THE BONPO PHURBA

We know almost nothing about the daggers used by Bonpo priests. However, the 'thangkas' and manuscripts present in the work of P.Kvaerne dedicated to this religion, show a small number of deities holding only phurba or sceptres of simple design. These are composed of a longish blade finishing in a geometric form (lozenge, cube or ball). That Bonpo priests used this type of dagger is confirmed by the remarkable photography of Joseph Rock taken in a monastery in Amdo in 1926 (actually within the Chinese province of Qinghai). The unadorned style of these objects gives them a strong abstract character in which they strongly resemble the Indian kila (nail). Therefore, they could be accredited with having preceded in time the more elaborate forms of the Buddhist phurba.

## THE TRIBAL PHURBA

Generally speaking, the basic structure previously described is respected, but the 'tribal' daggers are less codified and hence more varied than their 'classical' equivalents. The blade is equally triangular, most often accompanied by snakes and frequently engraved with diverse symbols amongst which the most represented are the moon and the sun, the trident (trisula, emblem of Shiva and the three aspects of his manifestation: creation, preservation and destruction), the varja, representations of Shaman and animals, water bowls (kalasa in Sanskrit, bumpa in Tibetan), divinatory signs.. The blade is crowned by the head of a makara, sometimes very stylised, this can be replaced by a geometric figure, another animal (garuda, crow, snake...) or more rarely by anthropomorphic figures.

If the central part 'the body' of the phurba are, without exception, identical to or almost identical to the Buddhist phurba, the same cannot be said for the head. The three faces (sometimes 2, 4 or more), fashioned in the 'tribal' way, can be crowned by seated or standing figures (often Shaman recognisable by their long robes, braided hair and their necklaces of rudraksha), animals (monkeys, lions, elephants, horses...), religious symbols (half-vajra, head-dresses..) sometimes they finish in a simple ring to which are traditionally attached strips of cloth and/or metal chains ending in diverse emblems (pieces of metal in the shape of the moon, the sun, a trident, a knife...).

In addition, one notes that the handles of the ritual drum (dhyangro) used by Buddhist monks or Shaman are completely based on the structure of the phurba as far as the blade and the central part 'body' are concerned. However, the 'head' is replaced by a wooden frame on which two skins are stretched, one on either side.

## PHURBA AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

On a religious level, the phurba is the principal attribute of the wrathful divinity Vajrakila, but one also finds them in the hands of a number of other divinities. In general, the classical phurba are associated with the powers of certain divinities. Cited amongst the most important: Vajrakilaya (Dorje phurba in Tibetan). The cycle of the tantric teachings of Vajrakilaya, whose existence is mentioned in the Buddhist texts (Tanjur) date back at least as far as the seventh century, these would have been introduced into Tibet the following century by

Padmasambhava himself. However, there have also been suggestions of Vajrakilaya being of pre-Buddhist Bon origin as well as being incorporated in the ancient Lamaist pantheon. However that may be, Dorje Phurba is linked to a whole cycle of legends and rituals. The principle function of this chosen deity (yi-dam in tantric Buddhism) - the yi-dam are deities chosen by disciples under the guidance of a master, who, through a complete inner visualisation serve as a support to meditation - is to dissipate the obstacles that hinder spiritual practice. To this end, the great phurba made in his image are destined to be placed at the centre of mandalas, serving as the central support to meditation.

Hayagriva (ta-mgrin in Tibetan), the incarnation of Vishnu within tantric Buddhism. Within the Nyingmapa, this deity is found in the system of "trikaya", at the side of Samantabhadra and Padmasambhava. Hayagriva is regarded as a violent manifestation of Avalokitesvara, who adopted this form in order to defeat a demon with the head of a horse named Matong. The worship of Hayagriva was introduced into Tibet by Padmasambhava. The functions of this divinity are to purify the soul of the disciple and to remove obstacles. Hayagriva possesses the capacity to cure numerous illnesses, notably those of the skin, including leprosy – considered as being provoked by the snakes (naga). The Phurba portray him as a terrifying deity crowned with one or three horse's heads.

Dorje Drolo (Dorje gro-lod), the "diamond with the falling belly", is a wrathful form of Padmasambhava, made manifest in order to subdue the demons and local deities during a stay in Taktsang (the tiger's den) in Bhutan. Other manifestations of Padmasambhava are equally represented on Phurba such as Loden Chogse (Lo-ilan mchog-sred), the form under which the master would have received the principle tantric teachings.

Padmasambhava, alias Guru Rimpoche "the precious master" is attributed as having introduced most of these deities into Tibet during the eighth century. He is considered as the earthly manifestation of Buddha Amitabha, which means "infinite light". Born miraculously in the heart of a pure lotus in lake Dhanakosa in Oddiyana (a region situated on the frontier between Pakistan and the north-west of Afghanistan), he was at first adopted by the king Indrabodhi who made him heir to his throne. In the manner of Sakyamuni, instead of revelling in his privileges, he preferred to go and rejoin the charnel houses of India where he received the teachings of the dakini and the most eminent tantric masters. He became the trustee of the mantras and of the Dzogchen "the great perfection" and strong from his spiritual realisation, subdued demons, subjugated the heretics and taught. In the company of his disciple Mandarava, he went to Nepal where he accomplished the practice of longevity of the Buddha Amitayus, and acquired "the diamond body of eternal life". In the company of another of his disciples, the Nepalese Sakyadevi, he vanquished demonic obstacles by the practice of Dorje Phurba. A short time later, towards 747 of our epoch, he was invited to Tibet by the king Thrisong Detsen, on the advice of the learned Indian Samtaraksita, who he aided in conquering the demons who opposed the edification of Samye monastery. He participated in the selection of the monks appointed to translate the Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan. He then initiated 25 disciples in the principles of the tantric cycles, including the king, the queen Yeshe Tsogyel, translators, yogis ... Shortly before his departure, aided by Yeshe Tsogyel and certain disciples he concealed a large number of his teachings in a variety of hiding-places which gave birth to the tradition of the hidden treasures (terma). Then he left Tibet mysteriously for the land of raksasa where he established his kingdom "the glorious copper mountain" (Padmasambhava paradise 'Sangdog Pairi'). He founded the ancient Buddhist lineage of Nyingmapa where his cult is particularly important, and is equally followed by the Kagyupa, Sakyapa and certain Gelugpa, which include the Dalai lamas.

Buddhists regard the phurba as a ritual dagger, which symbolises the irreversible power of the mantra "Om". It gives the power to fight against: demons and evil spirits (sri in Tibetan), the causes of illness, agricultural catastrophes and disasters. To this end, it is used in numerous

incantations against the enemies of the region. It appears in the purification ceremonies of the earth before the construction of a monastery, and again to establish a protective circle around a mandala. It is also one of the principle accessories used by monks during religious dances, it is used to strike blows in different directions, its function being to show the way the incantations should travel. In certain 'dances' or rituals, a figurine made from dough, the *linga*, representing the forces of evil or the illusions that impede our conscience from attaining a pure vision of reality, is nailed to the ground with a *phurba*. Through this symbolic act, the monk's objective is not to kill or destroy, but rather to immobilise and subdue the 'obscure forces' in order to assure the redemption of all beings, this including the demons who will find themselves liberated, transformed and converted.

Other than the monastic and purely religious uses previously discussed, the *phurba* are equally used privately by lamas and mediums (*Lha-mo* in Tibetan). In particular, where an illness or misfortune is attributed to demons, the head of a family can (if the family is rich enough to afford one), call upon the services of a medium or lama. Accompanied by the family members he will walk around the house directing the point of the *phurba* in all directions uttering incantations out loud. The intervention of a medium or lama, is as for the Nepalese shaman, aimed at removing the forces of evil, the causes of illness and other catastrophes. Each monk should have a *phurba* to reinforce the power of the ceremonies he performs. Each accessory is consecrated during a ritual performed by qualified monks, which involves the recitation of mantra. Ancient objects, which belonged to magicians or saints are reputed to possess a superior power. The passing on of *phurba* from master to disciple is mentioned in religious literature and can be carried out over centuries, by an uninterrupted line of masters.

## PHURBA AND SHAMANISM

The shaman of the middle mountains of Nepal belong to divers ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sherpa, Tamang, Thakali... They are called "dharmi" in the west, "bijuwa" in the east and more currently "jhankri" in the central regions. Side by side Buddhist and Hindu priests with whom they respect and indeed share a religious belief, shaman play a fundamental role as healers, entering into a trance state in order to heal, exorcise, predict the future and assure funeral ceremonies. Mediators between the spirit world and the villagers, they are the voice of the divine. They call upon various ritual objects to fight against the forces of evil, of which the most important are the *phurba* and the *dhyangro*, a round double-sided drum having a handle in the form of a *phurba*, beaten with a curved stick called a *gajo*.

Most *phurba* used by shaman are made from wood, some of them will be sculpted, along with other instruments, by the young *jhankri* at the end of his initiation, generally after a dream in which he sees the tree and the branches he must use and the shape he must give to his 'tools'. However, we know that these instruments can pass from a shaman to his son, to a disciple, even to a lama, this therefore excludes the systematic fabrication of these objects by the user. For example, specialised craftsmen called *shikhahuni* (*khapa* in Tibetan) would produce a significant quantity of these objects for the shaman. Furthermore, the pieces of metal (tapered ends of the daggers, attachment rings and chains...) added to certain *phurba* would be made by members of the untouchable class of blacksmiths (*kami*). The use of *phurba* by shaman necessitates a particular initiation, the wielding of the dagger being reputed to be dangerous for those not knowing how to manipulate it. The *vajra* (diamond thunderbolt) used as the handle of the ritual knife is frequently covered by a piece of cloth. The shaman avoids direct contact with the thunderbolt that could consume him as the *vajra* initiation is reserved only for Buddhist priests and lamas.

One notes that the shamans are not alone in covering the phurba. The same is true even of Buddhist monks during certain ceremonies and dances. The phurba appear in different rituals concerning divination and healing. In the middle of these rituals “the jhankri takes hold of his ritual dagger and starts to dance furiously directing the phurba towards all the places where an evil presence could be lodged. To heal his patient he vigorously touches the part of the body where he is suffering with the triangular blade of his wooden knife. This is adorned with snakes - symbols of fecundity and powerful telluric forces - being fought by an eagle, ally of the divine forces of heaven.

## THE PARTICULAR CASE OF THE ‘HORSEMEN’ PHURBA

There also exists a very characteristic type of phurba known through different examples found in various collections, comprising of one or two horsemen with clasped hands at the top and a peculiar diamond-shaped blade, crowned by an equally characteristic makara head. Differentiated from the other phurba by their style and relatively large volume, they seem to originate from the same region and have a precise function.

Of uncertain origin, we were told by a Nepalese tradesman Dawa Gyeltsen that this type of object was of Sherpa origin and that travelling traders would use it as a protection talisman and place it in their luggage during their travels. However, we have no recorded documentation to support this hypothesis.

On the other hand, drums (dhyangro) of an identical style have been found amongst the Tamang and the Thami. These two groups occupy the central and eastern mountains to the south of the Sherpa territory, and are frequently in contact with them, which could explain an eventual confusion.

Alas, none of the knowledgeable authors on this subject have made allusion to the existence of phurba identical to the dhyangro that they portray. Therefore, we know nothing of the identity and symbology of the horsemen found on the pommel of the phurba. On the other hand, Andras Hofer describes precisely the blade and handle through various texts and figures. According to a member of the Tamang the drum handle and therefore, probably this type of phurba would be sculpted in wood from the Juniper tree (*Juniperus* sp.), the Plum tree (*Prunus* sp.) or from Mountain-ebony (*Bauhinia variegata*). This type of phurba is comprised of from top to bottom:

- one or two horsemen with clasped hands
- a platform with geometrical friezes or more frequently four ‘smiling’ faces called “haha-hihi lajo”  
a term of Tibetan origin symbolising ‘haha’ - the hero’s frightful laugh. ‘hihi’ - the hero’s kindly laugh, and ‘Iha-tshogs’ : literally – the group of gods. From another source the correct name for the four faces would be ‘chyosyi linsyi’, in Tibetan ‘phyogs bzhi, gling bzhi’, literally ‘ four directions, four continents’.
- a handle in the form of a vajra, enclosed or not by the knots of eternity (this central part is sometimes absent or simplified).
- a massive makara head (chyudirin in Tamang), with a visible tongue, sun signs on the cheeks and a kind of simplified eternity knot at the back, one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism.
- a triangular blade having on its three sides: entwined snakes (called Nambul or Samdul, alias Basuki Nag, “piercing the barrier between the superior and inferior worlds”, to the Tamang king of the naga and master of the inferior worlds), a trident (form associated with Shiva Mahadev) and a kind of bumpa or water bowl of long-life.