

# Magic, Healing and Ethics in Tibetan Buddhism

Sam van Schaik (The British Library)  
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I first met Michael Aris in 1997, while I was in the midst of my doctoral work on Jigme Lingpa and had recently moved to Oxford. Michael responded graciously to my awkward requests for advice and help, meeting with me in his college rooms, and replying to numerous emails, which I still have printed out and on file (this was the 90s, when we used to print out emails). Michael also made a concerted effort to have the Bodleian order an obscure Dzogchen text at my request, giving me a glimpse into his work as an advocate of Tibetan Studies at Oxford. And though I knew Anthony Aris less well, I met him several times here in Oxford and elsewhere, and he was always a warm and generous presence.

When I came to Oxford I was already familiar with Michael's work, especially his book on Jigme Lingpa's account of India in the eighteenth century, and his study of the treasure revealer Pema Lingpa. Michael's approach, sympathetic yet critical, properly cautious but not afraid to explore new connections and interpretations, was also an inspiration to me. I hope to reflect a little bit of that spirit in this evening's talk.

## What is magic?

So, this evening I'm going to talk about magic. But what is 'magic' anyway? Most of us have an idea of what the word means, but it is notoriously difficult to define. In the study of religions, one of the most influential definitions came from James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. In this book, Frazer described magic as the first, primitive stage in mankind's attempt to understand and control the world. According to Frazer, magic evolved into religion, a more sophisticated system that relied on supernatural beings. Religion in turn was superseded by science.

This distinction between magic and religion influenced later generations of anthropologists. Emile Durkheim saw religion as a shared set of beliefs held by a social group; magicians on the other hand, were lone agents, whose important relationships were with their clients. Thus he famously concluded, 'there is no church of magic'. Sigmund Freud saw magic as a form of wish fulfillment, in which the desire is projected onto the magical act itself.

More recently there has been a reaction against this discussion of magic, with a tendency among anthropologists and historians of religion to recommend abandoning the word 'magic' altogether. There is some merit in this argument. Our word 'magic' comes from a very particular place, and our distinction between religion and magic goes back to early Christianity, when criticising 'magic' was part and parcel of the way early Christians defined themselves and disparaged their rivals. Any spell, or amulet that was thought to embody a power other than that of Christ was characterised as the work of evil demons. The 'miracles' of Jesus and the Apostles had to be strongly differentiated from 'magic'.

If the word 'magic' comes with all this baggage, why use it? The fact is that magic continues to live as an important concept in specialist circles of esoteric practitioners, and more widely in fiction and games. People do tend to know what it means. The concept of magic is still widely used by scholars as well, despite its rise and fall from grace in the twentieth century. The study of Ancient Babylonian magic, Hellenistic magic, Jewish magic, and the European magical practices of the Middle Ages are very much alive and well today. They also have much to teach us about magic in the Buddhist world.

So, when I use the term 'Buddhist magic' I mean rituals entirely performed for this-worldly ends, in which the ultimate aim of Buddhism - awakening - is only indirectly present in the practice, if at all. When buddhas and bodhisattvas appear in these practices, their role as saviour or exemplar of enlightenment is not forefronted, and their purpose is only to guarantee the effects of the magic spell. And 'magic' overlaps with 'medicine' in that specific remedies are prescribed for specific problems. I do not mean to revive here Frazer's and Durkheim's idea that magic stands in opposition to religion. I think it would be better to see magic as having a specific role in the wider context of Buddhist practice.

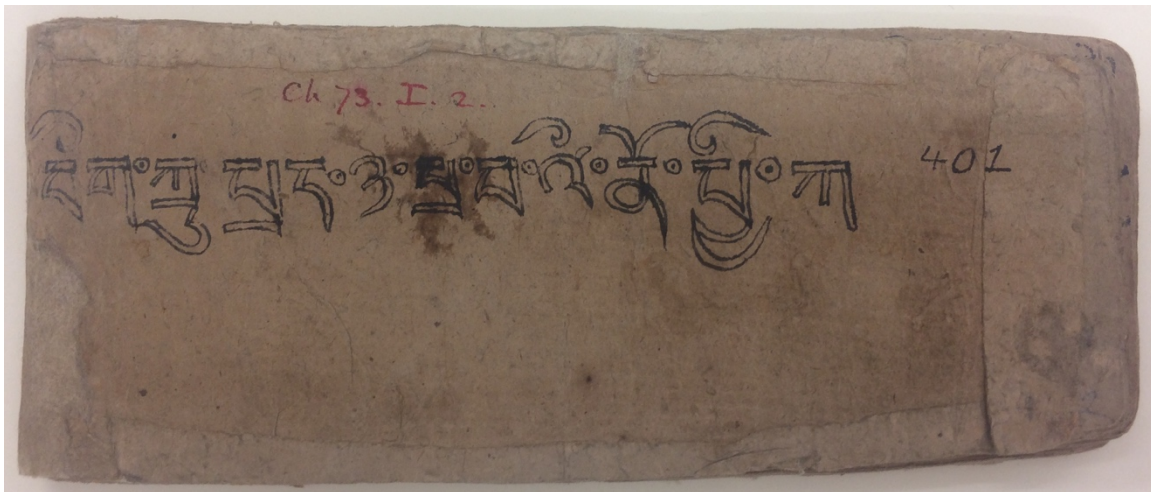
## A Tibetan book of spells

Now, to turn swiftly from theory to practice, let's look at an actual Tibetan book of spells. This book, the earliest surviving compendium of Tibetan Buddhist magical ritual, was found among the cache of thousands of manuscripts that had been sealed in a cave shrine at the beginning of the eleventh century. The shrine was part of a major Buddhist cave temple complex near the town of Dunhuang, in western China. The sealed cave was discovered by a Chinese monk in 1900, and subsequently visited by explorers from several colonial powers, who examined the manuscript cache and sent selections from it back to their own countries.

One of the largest selections from the cave was gathered by the Hungarian-British explorer Aurel Stein, and sent to London, where it now resides in the collections of the British Museum and British Library. This is the collection which I've had the privilege to work with for going on two decades now. The manuscripts include scrolls, loose leafs books called *pothi* and stitched booklets, and they are written in a variety of languages, including Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit and Khotanese. Most of them contain Buddhist texts, though there are also letters, contracts, shopping lists, and other everyday texts.

The manuscripts found in the cave were arranged in bundles and may have been the personal collections of various Buddhist monks and nuns (and perhaps some lay people). As to why the cave was sealed, several scholars have suggested the threat of imminent invasion by non-Buddhists, but this is perhaps an overly dramatic explanation. Since the cave was almost full when it was re-opened, it may be that it have simply outlived its purpose. After it was sealed, the wall was painted over with a fresco, so the driving force behind sealing the manuscript cave may just have been that a patron was paying for redecoration.<sup>1</sup>

So this is the context in which this early Buddhist book of spells came to light. It is one of several thousand Tibetan manuscripts from the cave, yet in some ways quite different from all the others. The manuscript, which has the shelfmark IOL Tib J 401, is a codex, formed of bifolios stitched along the middle with thread. When opened out, the bifolios are oblong (8 x 19 cm). This format continues in later Tibetan manuscripts, and we have examples from as late as the nineteenth century.



The Tibetan book of spells from Dunhuang (IOL Tib J 401)

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<sup>1</sup> This is a brief summary of the arguments in chapter 2 of Sam van Schaik and Imre Galambos, *Manuscripts and Travellers*, Berlin: de Gruyter (2012).

The book is covered in small Tibetan cursive writing, which is legible though not very neat. Occasionally the writer has added a few notes to clarify obscure words or practices. The writing style helps us to date the manuscript a little more precisely, as it is not one of the styles used during the time that Dunhuang was occupied by the Tibetan empire, between the late eight and mid-ninth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Thus we can date the book to between the late ninth and late tenth century. The evident wear and tear, and some repairs that were made to the book indicate that it had been used quite extensively before it was placed in the Dunhuang cave, so my best guess would that it was being used in the early to mid tenth century.

The manuscripts found in the Dunhuang cave came as far afield as central China, southern Tibet and even India, but this book of spells was probably a local product. Microscopic analysis of the paper has shown that it was made from rags, a product of recycled textiles. This kind of paper was used in the area around Dunhuang and further west along the Silk Road, where other sources of pulp were scarce. Thus we have in this book a product of the Buddhist culture of the eastern Silk Road in the early tenth century, though many of the practices contained within it date from much earlier.<sup>3</sup>

## Contents of the book of spells

The Dunhuang spellbook contains literally hundreds of spells for all kinds of purposes. Since it would be impossible to describe them all, I'll try to give you a selection from one chapter of the compendium. These are all spells related to the practice of the wrathful female deity Bhṛkūti, who is sometimes known as the consort of Avalokiteśvara. Bhṛkūti was also the name of the Nepalese princess who is said to have come to the Tibetan court and married the emperor Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century.

To find the location of a precious treasure at the peak of a mountain, place an incense burner on a piece of clean cotton cloth, and burn gugul; take one a knife and show it to the four directions, then draw a *sa* in the ground in each of the four corners, and set the boundary. Recite the mantra 1,108 times and throw seven times in each of the four directions. If you do this, the treasure gates will open by themselves, and the treasure guardians will come and offer you whatever precious things you desire.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sam van Schaik, 'Dating Early Tibetan Manuscripts: A Paleographical Method.' In Brandon Dotson, Kazushi Iwao and Tsuguhito Takeuchi (eds), *Scribes, Texts and Rituals in Early Tibet and Dunhuang*, edited by. Weisbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013. 119–135.

<sup>3</sup> For the results of this paper analysis, see Sam van Schaik and Agnieszka Helman-Wazny, 'Witnesses for Tibetan Craftsmanship: Bringing Together Paper Analysis, Palaeography and Codicology in the Examination of the Early Tibetan Manuscripts' *Archaeometry* 55.4 (2012): 15–16, 29.

To cure an illness, first it is important to do the appropriate mudrās to cure the illness: make the summoning gesture with the index finger and middle finger of the left hand. On your [other] palm, trace round and round while pressing down. Raise each of your other fingers. Say the mantra 108 times. Then do the mudrā seven times touching the hand of the patient and they will be cured.

If you want to stop a curse or an evil sign, write the name of the sick person on a piece of paper, say the mantra, and they will be cured.

To dry up a lake: beat an effigy of a nāgā (serpent spirit), which is made from gold, silver or iron, while saying the mantra 1,008 times, then throw it into the lake. The lake will dry up.

If you want to reverse a river, making it flow upstream: make an effigy of a duck and throw it into the river, saying the mantra 108 times; the river will flow upstream. If you want it to flow downstream again, on a cairn made of clean stones, make an effigy of a raven. If you throw it into the river, it will flow downstream again.

If a malevolent person appears, and you want them to be struck by lightning or a meteor: make this mudrā - draw in to your palm the middle finger, ring finger and little finger of your left hand, and raise your forefinger; cross your thumb and forefinger across the middle joint. Recite the mantra, then use the mudrā to indicate where it will strike; destruction will come quickly.

In order not be bitten by a dog, say the mantra seven times over a little meat and drink, and offer it to the dog. The dog's anger will be pacified, and for the rest of the day, it will not bite you.

To bring a *shatru* under your power. Write the person's family name on a piece of paper, and tread it under your feet. Recite the mantra 108 times, while trampling on it till it can no longer be seen. After a day, the *shatru* will be able to have any malevolent thoughts, and will act kindly towards you.

To break up two *priya*, tread both people's family names under the feet of the vidyādhara. If they do not separate, say the mantra 200 times, and visualise the two of them breaking up; if you do, after a day they will no longer be lovers and will break up.

To reconcile two people who are unfriendly, do the same as in the previous ritual, visualising the two being reconciled. They will want to end their *bhyavahara*.<sup>4</sup>

If you want to render another person unable to speak write their name on a piece of paper. After saying the mantra, put it in the mouth (note - your own mouth). They will not be able to talk.

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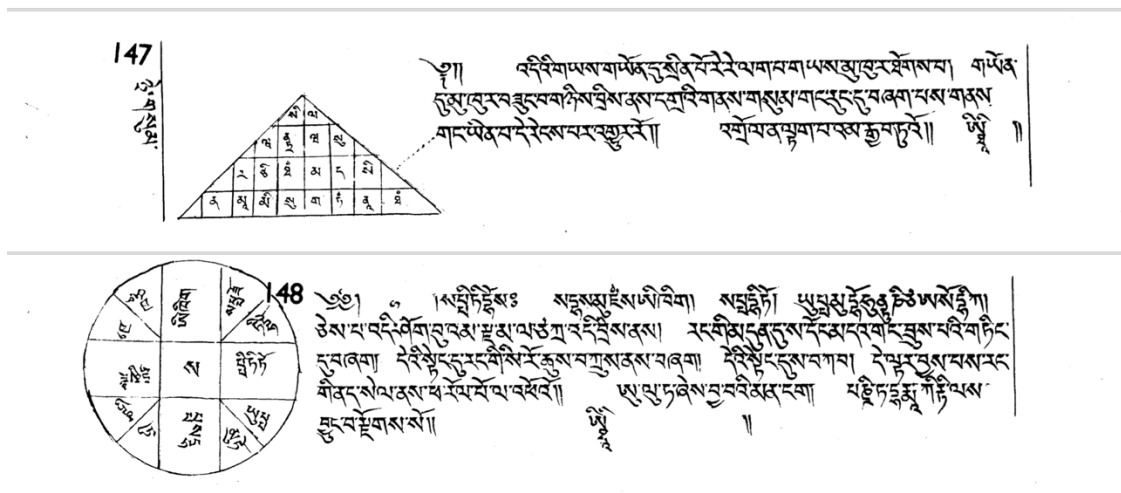
<sup>4</sup> The above three rituals use Sanskrit terms: *śatru*, 'enemy'; *priya*, 'lover'; and *vyavahāra*, 'quarrel'.

# The Bari Beubum

There must have been a wide variety of books of spells produced in India which have disappeared along with most early palm-leaf manuscripts. Among the manuscripts that have survived in Nepal, there are collections of spells on rainmaking and other themes, but these have hardly been investigated yet. In Tibet, the situation is better, with many more old manuscripts having survived, and the inscription of these into modern printed editions after the Tibetan diaspora at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s.

One of the earliest, most extensive and varied of these is a collection called the *Bari Beubum*, or ‘the grimoire of Bari’. The odd term Beubum (*be’u ’bum*) refers to books that contain collections of medical and magical practices. The *Bari Beubum* is named after its author Bari Rinchen Drag (1040–1111), also known as Bari Lotsawa, a title given to translators. Bari Lotsawa was one of the most important Tibetan translators of *sādhana*s, Vajrayana Buddhist practice texts, and late in his life he also became the second head of the Sakya school for eight years.

Bari Lotsawa undertook two journeys from Tibet to Nepal and India to study and translate Buddhist rituals with local teachers. His best known work is the *Bari Gyatsa*, a collection of just under a hundred tantric meditation texts, many of which focus on ‘ordinary accomplishments’ including healing, wealth generation, and love magic. The ‘supreme accomplishment’ of enlightenment is also addressed by many of these practices, so the collection is on the borderline of my loose definition of a book of spells. Baripa’s other main collection, on the other hand, the *Bari Beubum* falls squarely into the category of magical literature.



Pages from the *Bari Beubum*.

The *Bari Beubum* is actually a collection of collections, perhaps a posthumous compilation of all the spell books compiled by Baripa in his lifetime. The titles of the individual collections include 'Profound Advice for Doctors' (*Gso byed gdams pa zab mo*) and 'Portable Instructions' (*Gyogs kyi man ngag*). The first of these collections, the 'Advice for Doctors', is thirty-eight folios long and begins with some verses explaining why this new medical text is needed. Apparently poisoning is rife in these degenerate times and powerful remedies are required. Baripa begins by telling the reader how to collect a rare leaf known as the Chigtub Pawo (*gcig thub dpa' bo*) or 'all accomplishing hero'. He says that it can be found in the Mon region, meaning modern Nepal and Bhutan, where it grows in pine-forested hills, especially on rocky cliffsides. He says it can also be found in Tibet, where it grows on dry, thorny plains and has thinner leaves.

About halfway through the 'Advice for Doctors', the rituals move away from healing and towards a variety of magical practices, including sending somebody a bad dream, bringing down a hailstorm, rituals for bringing rain, including a 'black rain ritual' that is presumably intended for aggressive purposes. The collection ends with rituals for travellers, including a ritual for protection while on the road, and 'Urgyen Padmasambhava's ritual for destroying a migo' (*mi rgod*), the wild creature also known as the yeti.

The same mix of medical and protective rituals, weather control and aggressive magic is found in the 'Portable Instructions', the name of this collection suggesting that it was compiled for travellers. It begins with instructions on capturing or binding enemies using a magic diagram, using the Sanskrit term *yantra bandhana*. The *yantra* is a magical drawing, usually a symmetrical diagram, used for a variety of magical purposes in India since the Vedic period. They have been used in Buddhism from an early period, and are found in most Buddhist cultures, including Thailand and Burma.<sup>5</sup> When introduced into Tibet, the word *yantra* was translated as 'magic circle' (*'khrul 'khor*). The use of yantras has continued in Tibetan Buddhism through to the present day, and their popularity in Indian Hindu traditions seems to be unabated. As well as describing yantras and their use, the Portable Instructions contain examples of some yantra diagrams.

Sometimes in the Portable Instructions, Bari tells the reader who he received the ritual from. The people named are almost always Indian or Nepalese figures, with names like Gotama Svāmī, Śarṇanātha, Śīvaratna, Mañjuśrījñāna and Buddharakṣita. The names of some of these informants suggest that they may not all have been Buddhists, or may have come to Buddhism from another tradition, such as Śaivism. Baripa probably studied with some of them on his travels, while he may have met others in Tibet. Baripa tells us that one ritual for repelling hostile non-Buddhists was given to Marpa Lotsawa (1012–1097), an equally prominent teacher in the eleventh century. Marpa received the

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<sup>5</sup> See Kate Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression*, Hong Kong: Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong (2013): 62–63.

ritual from Vairocanavajra, an Indian from Orissa who travelled to Tibet, and from there on to China. Vairocanavajra is best known in Tibet for translating a major collection of the songs of realisation of Indian tantric masters. In China he is said to have made a success of himself through teaching life-extending practices.<sup>6</sup>

Anyway, the contents of the Portable Instructions are clearly aimed at the needs of travelling ritual specialists. We have a spell for 'swift feet' using the flesh of a horse's eye and four crushed birds, spells for travelling dangerous routes and avoiding robbers, a spell to be cast before entering a king's residence, and spells for dominating and overpowering people. Spells for services to others are here as well, including medical treatments and rainmaking rituals.

## Buddhist magic and violence

The variety of spells found in the Dunhuang spellbook and the *Bari Beubum* are fairly representative of what we find in most in Tibetan grimoires. The Buddhist ethic of liberation for all is invoked at various points in these collections, and on the wordly level, the multiple medical and protective spells offer at least a temporary surcease of suffering. Yet there is no avoiding the fact that spells for the killing of enemies are also found here, and there is no hint that these enemies are metaphorical or spiritual.

Stories of aggressive magic abound in the Tibetan tradition, especially from the time of Bari Lotsawa. Biographies of Lamas from the 11th and 12th centuries feature magical contests, sometimes resulting in death. One of the most famous, or infamous of these lamas is Ra Lotsawa (b.1012), another translator, who also picked up magical rituals in Nepal and India, and is said to have killed thirteen rival teachers in this way.

But the most famous Tibetan user of black magic must be Milarepa. As his story goes, Milarepa learned various aggressive magical practices, and brought down a hailstorm in an act of revenge, causing many deaths. Anguished by his crimes, he went to seek a teacher to purify him, and came to Marpa Lotsawa, again a translator and traveller. The story of Milarepa's redemption is well known: Marpa refused to give him teachings until he had built a tower, but when Milarepa had completed the tower, Marpa told him to pull it down and start again. Only after Milarepa had given up hope entirely did Marpa agree to transmit the teachings to him. And of course, Milarepa in time became one of Tibet's best beloved saints.

It is not always remembered that Marpa was not entirely against Milarepa's use of aggressive magic. In the most famous biography of Milarepa, the one by Tsangnyon Heruka, Marpa tells Milarepa to keep his book of spells away from his Buddhist shrine.

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<sup>6</sup> Kurtis Schaeffer 'The Religious Career of Vairocanavajra' *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28.4 (2000).



But then, Marpa instructs Milarepa to cast two aggressive spells. When Milarepa first requests teachings, Marpa instead tells him to bring down hailstorms on two regions where bandits are attacking disciples who are on their way to visit Marpa with offerings. When Milarepa successfully brings down terrible hailstorms, Marpa says: “Was it for these meagre bits of hail you cast that I brought back the dharma from India with such difficulty?” And Marpa demands another spell from Milarepa, this time against some highlanders who have shown him contempt. This time Milarepa casts a spell that causes the highlanders to turn against each other, and as the biography says, “many died at the point of a sword.” It’s only after this that Marpa allows Milarepa to move on to the tower-building stage of his apprenticeship.

What are we to think of this? It feels like Tsangnyon Heruka (the author of this biography) is challenging us here, making us face up to our own preconceptions of right and wrong. But he doesn’t offer any solutions.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to make a couple of points to put this question into a broader context. The Tibetan sources offer ample evidence for the use of aggressive magic by Buddhists, but it’s important to understand that this was not an innovation of Tibetan Buddhism. We also have accounts of Buddhist monks practising magic for warlords in China during the early centuries of Chinese Buddhism. Like the Tibetan biographies, these are not reliable historical sources, but do indicate the range of activities that were required, and to some extent expected in successful Buddhist monks. Fotudeng (232–348), a monk who travelled to China from the Silk Road city of Kucha, offered magical assistance to several warlords in return for their patronage. There are several descriptions of his magical practices in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks*. For example:

[Fotudeng] sat down on a corded bench, burned Parthian incense, chanted an invocation of several hundred words. When he had done like this for three days, water seeped out a few drops at a time. There was a small dragon, about five or six inches long, which came out with the water... In a little while the water came in abundance, and the dry moats were all filled.<sup>8</sup>

Fotudeng used his magical skills to help warlords whose violence was well known; one of them was described by Erik Zürcher as ‘a psychopath whose reign was one of unprecedented terror’.<sup>9</sup> Now, Fotudeng is also said to have converted thousands to

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes (though not always) violence by a Buddhist master is justified in Tibetan sources by reference to the practice of ‘liberating’ beings from the negative actions and their results; see the discussion of this in relation to Ra Lotsawa in Charles Ramble, ‘The good, the bad and the ugly: the circumscription of saintly evil in Tibetan biography’ in Linda Covill, Ulrike Roesler and Sarah Shaw (eds) *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Translation from Arthur Wright, ‘Fo T’u T’eng: A Biography’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 11 (1948): 341–42.

<sup>9</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, Leiden: Brill (2007): 181.

Buddhism through his teaching and spells, but there is an ethical quandary here similar to that posed by the story of Marpa and Milarepa. And again, the Buddhist monks who wrote these biographies did not try to resolve the quandary for us.

It is also important for us to understand that magic is not specific to the Vajrayana, or even Mahayana Buddhism. Several early Buddhist scriptures offer magical protection from supernatural beings such as ghosts (*preta*) and the nature spirits known as *yakṣas*. This genre of protective ritual is known in the Theravada as *paritta* and in Sanskrit sources as *rakṣa* - both words meaning 'protection'. One of the earliest and most popular of the Buddhist magical texts, the *Āṭānāṭīya sūtra* provides a method for monks to ward off attacks from dangerous *yakṣas* by invoking the aid of benevolent *yakṣas* with a recitation. In this sutra the protective recitation is provided by Vaiśrava, a mythical king with an entourage of benevolent *yakṣas*.

The *Āṭānāṭīya sūtra* is in the Pali canon, and remains an important part of Theravada practice. Sanskrit manuscripts from Central Asia show that it was practised in other early Buddhist sects too, and suggest that chanting these texts for magical protection predated the early schisms which gave rise to different sects.<sup>10</sup> Some magical texts translated into Pali were not included in the canon, but this does not mean that they were not popular. For example, the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā-dhāraṇī*, a text for magical protection that is very well known in Buddhist mahāyāna cultures, is also widely circulated in Theravada cultures in its Pali translation.<sup>11</sup>

As far as we can go back in the Buddhist manuscript record, we find magical literature: a magical text has been identified among the birchbark scrolls from ancient Gandhara, the earliest surviving Buddhist manuscripts. In this text, the king of the *nāgas* provides the Buddhists with a mantra that will protect them from threats including snakes, wild animals and *yakṣas*.<sup>12</sup> The line between protection and aggression is not always clear in these magical texts. Consider for example the *Mahāpratisarā-vidyārājñī*, in which the monk is instructed to summon a variety of gods and spirits and chant: "Kill, kill all enemies. Burn, burn all the wicked among Pretas, Piśācas, Ḍākinīs, humans and non-humans. Roast, roast the heart, crush the life of all wicked Grahas."<sup>13</sup> The violence of

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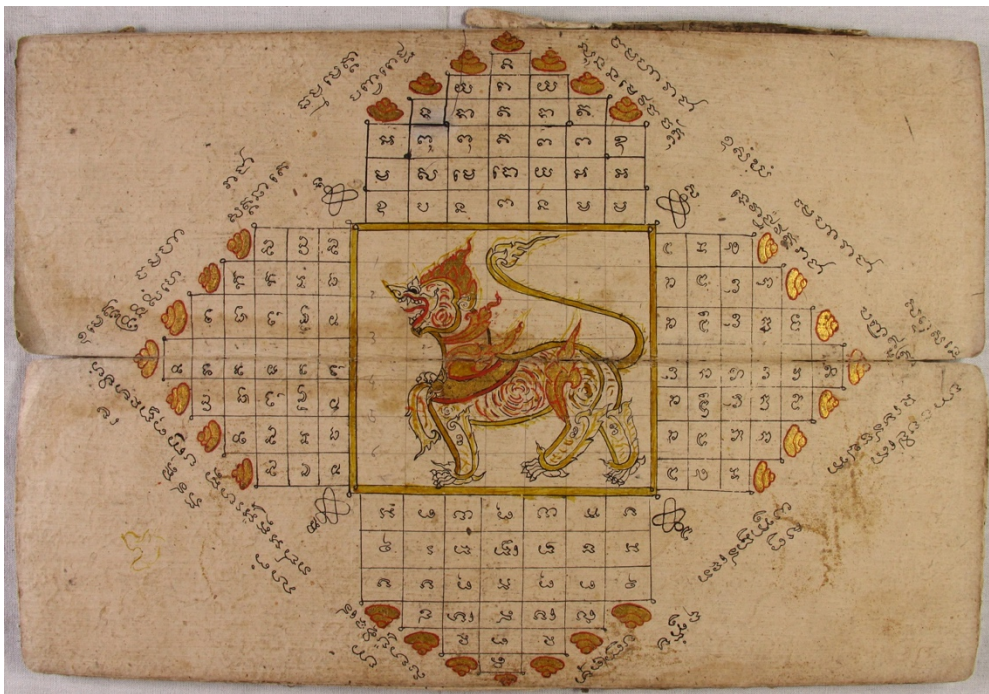
<sup>10</sup> Peter Skilling, 'The *Rakṣā* Literature of the Śrāvakayāna', *Journal of the Pāli Text Society* 15 (1992): 168.

<sup>11</sup> See the papers collected in Claudio Cicuzza (ed.) *Katā me rakkhā, katā me parittā: Protecting the protective texts and manuscripts*, Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaves and Lumbini International Research Institute (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Ingo Strauch, 'The evolution of the Buddhist rakā genre in the light of new evidence from Gandhāra', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Gergely Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-vidyārājñī: The Great Amulet, Great Queen of Spells*. New Delhi: International Institute of Indian Culture: 245.

the language is clear, and so is the presence of humans in the list of those to be killed and roasted.



A Thai Buddhist yantra (British Library Or.15760)

## Buddhist magic and Buddhist ethics

Now, I hardly need to say it, but the prime ethical injunction of Buddhism is to refrain from killing sentient beings. The ethical quandary raised by the presence of violence within Buddhism has been addressed many times. The most influential scriptural source for this is the *Upāyakaūśalya sūtra*. Here we find the story of a previous life of the Buddha in which he was a ship's captain. In the story, the captain is in the middle of a sea voyage when he is informed in a dream that there is a thief on his ship who is planning to kill and steal from the other passengers. The captain considers how to resolve the problem, rejecting the option of telling the other passengers in case they decide to kill the thief and thus suffer the karmic consequences of killing. On the other hand, not acting at all will result in the death of the thief's victims. So the captain decides to kill the thief himself, and does so in the spirit of great compassion (which incidentally is also the captain's name).

This story bears some resemblance to the 'thought experiments' of modern Western philosophy. Yet it is different from these in that it does not suggest that the reader identify with the ship's captain. The captain is placed in a position of omniscience, knowing the karmic situation of everyone on the ship and the effect that their actions

will have on their futures. This is exactly the kind of omniscience that, on a larger scale, is attributed to a buddha. This is the wisdom that is said to be allied with compassion in buddhas and bodhisattvas, with the clear-sightedness of wisdom and the selflessness of compassion working as one in their enlightened activities. Thus the story of the ship's captain establishes a consequentialist approach to ethics, undermining any belief in the essential truth of the ethical precepts of Buddhism. At the same time, it reserves the breaking of these precepts for those with full knowledge of all consequences, that is, only for buddhas and bodhisattvas.

So unless we assume that all Buddhist users of aggressive magic were enlightened, the presence of violent magic in Buddhist scriptures and biographies is still an unresolved tension. One way for us to think about it is to move out of the realm of doctrine and theory, and move into history. We know that Buddhist monks were often operating in difficult environments where their position was insecure. While the ideal of monastic seclusion placed them outside of the threats and needs of lay life, their reliance of lay sponsorship placed them directly in the sights of lay people looking for solutions to their problems. A wide variety of spells allowed monks to negotiate these needs.

Furthermore, in situations where a simple journey could easily result in being robbed and killed, the prohibition on carrying weapons left monks exposed. We can see early magical scriptures like the *Mahāpratisarā-vidyārājñī* playing a psychological role, giving a sense of being protected to those who had placed themselves in a position of near defenselessness. Even if survival meant using a ritual that threatened destruction on others, this again might be justified from a certain point of view. For us, one result of studying Buddhist magic, whether through texts or in contemporary practices, is to see that Buddhism exists in the world, and that moral principles may be cherished and transgressed at the same time.

The movement between moral principles, the transgression of those principles, and the confession and purification of that transgression, is integral to Buddhist practice. From an early stage in monastic Buddhism, a communal confession ritual, the *poṣadha*, was practiced every two weeks in every monastery. This confession ritual remains at the centre of monastic Buddhism in Tibet, China, and wherever the Buddhist monastic code is maintained. Confession rituals for lay people, including kings, are found in places like the the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*. And in tantric Buddhism, the confession and purification ritual of meditating on the deity Vajrasattva is one of the key preliminaries to many tantric empowerment and meditation practices.

## The transgression of Bari Lotsawa

I would like to end by sharing a story from the Tibetan tradition. This story is about Bari Lotsawa, the compiler of the 11th century compendium of spells that I talked about earlier. The story is told by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo in the lineage history of the lion-faced dakini, *Siṃhamukhā*, based on earlier accounts of the transmission of the teachings.<sup>14</sup>

The great lotsawa Baripa went to India in order to listen, study, practice and translate the *sūtras* and *tantras* written in Indic languages. Afterward he travelled to Nepal, where he received teachings from, trained and conversed with Chiterwa the Newar.

During his stay in Nepal, Baripa engaged with the heretic teacher Bhavyarāja in dialogue and debate. Day after day, Bhavyarāja would defeat the lotsawa and win the debate. Despondent, finally one evening the lotsawa invoked his gurus and *yidams*, especially *Acala*, and prayed to them for help.

The next morning the lotsawa triumphed in the debate, with the heretic Bhavya experiencing a devastating loss. Bhavya became furious, and warned Master Baripa, saying, “You’ve slipped into a bad habit! Now I will cast spells upon you. You’ll either be left defeated and humiliated in no more than seven days, or you’ll be forced by the power of my black magic to accept my teachings!”

The lotsawa was utterly frightened and rushed back to the great scholar Chiterwa. In a trembling voice, Baripa recounted the debate with the heretic, saying, “As soon as I won, Bhavya became enraged and told me that he is going to cast evil spells which will destroy me within seven days! And if this is not the case, then the spells will force me to accept his teaching. What should I do?”

Chiterwa replied, “O lotsawa! Do not be afraid! It seems you would rather kill yourself than accept this heretic’s doctrine. Now, I will have to send you to India to train in averting the dark arts of life-taking evil spells with the great Guru *Vajrāsana*. Here, take from this box the powder of swift-footedness and rub it on your feet.”

So Baripa rubbed the powder on his feet, and he reached the Nepali lowlands that very same morning. After merely a half-day’s travel, Baripa arrived at the Vajra Throne (at *Bodhgayā*).

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<sup>14</sup> I have slightly amended and edited the translation by Stefan Mang, Peter Woods and Kaleb Yaniger (2018). See original translation and Tibetan text here: <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/jamyang-khyentse-wangpo/history-of-simhamukha>.

Baripa then met with the great Guru Vajrāsana and presented his letter of introduction from the learned Chiterwa. He also offered one *sho* of gold as a gift to Vajrāsana and related the story of his debate with the heretic teacher in great detail.

Vajrāsana replied, “O lotsawa! Do not be afraid of the heretic teacher! I have a variety of pith instructions for protection and reversal; one in particular is exceptionally profound and acute. In order to retrieve it, first you must prepare an excellent torma (offering cake) of flesh and blood on the evening of the tenth day of the month. While offering it, one-pointedly invoke and pray to the assembly of the Three Jewels and your gurus, yidams and ḍākinīs. Then at dawn you will receive a prophecy from the ḍākinīs.”

So the lotsawa prepared a tantric feast offering using four *sang* of gold and undertook the invocation. The gurus, yidams and ḍākinīs paid heed and as a result granted him the following prophecy, proclaiming, “O lotsawa! Do not be afraid of the heretic! We will grant you protection!”

The principle ḍākinī of this assembly was the esteemed wisdom ḍākinī Siṃhamukhā, who counselled him, saying, “The supreme among all pith instructions lies hidden about two miles to the south of the Vajra Throne. Search there for an iron boulder that looks like a dead yak. Beneath it you will find black earth in the shape of a triangle. If you dig there you will find a small sealed chest covered by charcoal. Inside of this there is a rhinoceros leather chest. Inside of this there is a chest made of the bodhi-tree wood. This chest contains a silver chest. Within the silver chest is a precious chest of gold. Within the gold chest is a turquoise chest. Inside the turquoise chest is a lapis-lazuli chest. Within this is a ruby chest, within which you will find ‘the fourteen syllable fierce averting mantra’, written with the heart-blood of all ḍākinīs. Once you have uncovered it, recite it every day twenty-one times, and you will be protected from all evil spells; you will avert all that is harmful, pacify all adversities and obstacles, and all siddhis and all that is favourable will come to you. If you recite it twenty-one times in the morning and strong disturbing negative thoughts arise, recite it no more!”

With those words, Siṃhamukhā vanished without a trace, like a rainbow into thin air. And so the lotsawa left before the break of dawn, carrying with him a large red torma as an offering. Soon he reached a yak-shaped boulder. As instructed, he dug where he found triangular-shaped black earth, and first came forth the charcoal.

Then, as the prophecy foretold, he took out the chests, and so he revealed the life-force mantra of all the ḍākinīs. In exchange for the treasure, the lotsawa placed a precious golden text in the chest and then hid it again just as he had found it.

The lotsawa then recited the mantra day and night without interruption. One day, at dusk, signs arose that the heretic had targeted the lotsawa with black magic, yet all the worldly ḍākinīs and dharmapālas sent by the heretic were unable to harm the lotsawa, so they became ashamed and left. Thus the lotsawa was able to avert the threat.

Then the esteemed and foremost wisdom ḍākinī Siṃhamukhā appeared once again in the sky before the lotsawa and spoke, “O Baripa, the heretic teacher Bhavyarāja has vomited blood and lives no more!”

Overjoyed, Bari Lotsawa returned to Guru Vajrāsana and shared this news. Guru Vajrāsana replied, “In these degenerate times, fearful sentient beings employ their negative emotions to win arguments. I am one such master,” he lamented, covering his head in disappointment. Moved, Bari Lotsawa prostrated many times before his Guru and confessed, “O Guru! Not only have I averted this evil out of fear, I have also engaged in spells that caused the death of my opponent. So now I must bear the fault of having taken the life of another!”

Vajrāsana replied, “It would have sufficed merely to wear the mantra I have spoken of on the body, but you have recited the mantra day and night without interruption! Thus you have accumulated the fault of killing. Now you must exert yourself in purifying this bad deed. Do not return to me until definite signs arise that it has been purified.”

For one whole year, then, the lotsawa exerted himself in purifying this evil, during which time he did not have a single opportunity to meet his guru, the great Vajrāsana. The close disciples of Vajrāsana, without any signs of pride, treated Baripa with great kindness, bringing him food and drink when possible, along with anything else he needed, all without the guru’s knowing. When signs finally arose that Baripa had purified his evil deeds, and his guru’s command had been accomplished and fulfilled, he was once again able to meet his guru.

From then onwards, Baripa requested many teachings and became both learned and faithful. When he returned to Tibet, he benefited beings on a vast scale. Later still, he journeyed to the glorious Sakya monastery and transmitted these empowerments, sādhanas and rituals to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo.

## Conclusion

That's the end of this story, though not for Bari Lotsawa, who went on to great success as a teacher in Tibet, eventually becoming the head of the Sakya school. It is interesting to note that those who followed Baripa on the Sakya throne included some of the most important teachers of Buddhist ethics in Tibet, including Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen and Sakya Pandita. And Baripa's lineage of Simhamukhā was also transmitted in the Gelugpa school thanks to Tsongkhapa, another great exponent of Buddhist ethics. I'm not saying there is hypocrisy here, in fact quite the opposite. I think that aggressive magic, and other transgressive behaviour, can actually be a driving impetus to formulating clear ethical positions.

This is not an issue to bring us to a comfortable conclusion, but I think it is good to feel a bit uncomfortable sometimes. And it is also good to recognise that the same discomfort about magical practices is expressed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition itself. Magic, especially aggressive magic, is not always pleasant to think about, especially when it's being used by Buddhist teachers. But – as we have seen – the Tibetan tradition itself has not shied away from confronting the good, the bad and the ugly in its own history. And this is something we could probably learn from as we continue to study and practice Tibetan Buddhism here in the West.

Thank you.