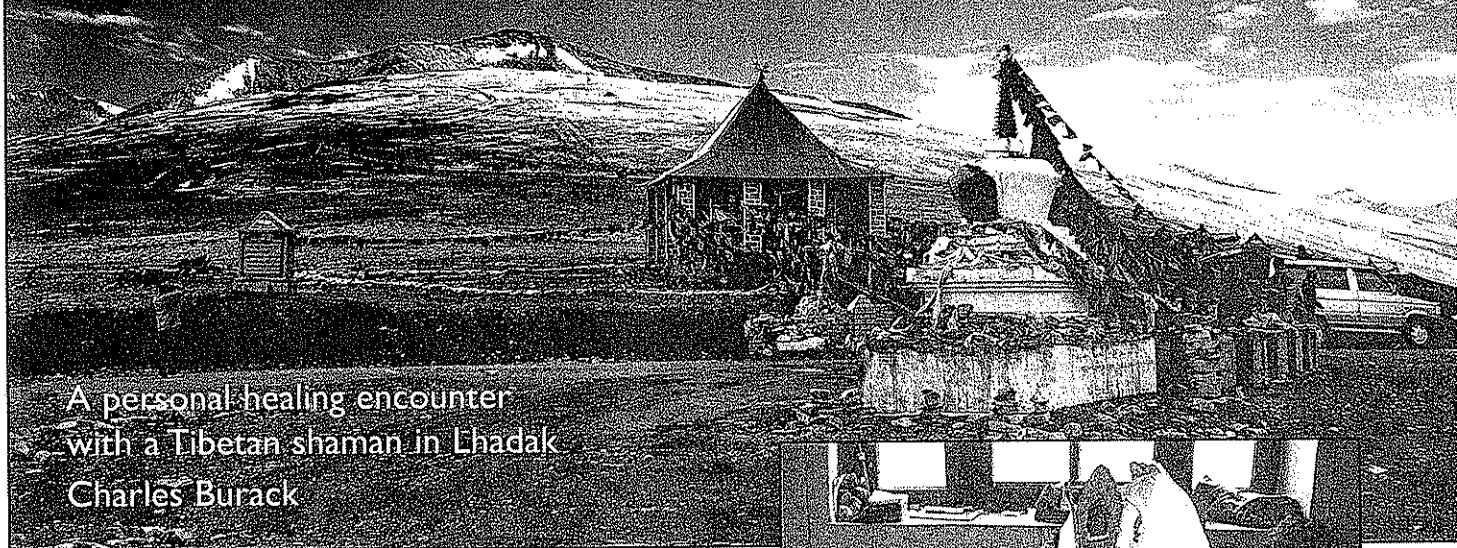


a visit to the Lhamo



A personal healing encounter
with a Tibetan shaman in Lhadak

Charles Burack

We first heard her name when we were staying in a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas. We had come to hike and climb and enjoy the beautiful mountain air and scenery, and Manali was a natural stopping point on our journey from Daramsala to Leh. Leh, perched at 11,550 feet above sea level in the upper Indus River valley, is the principal city of Ladakh, a region in Jammu and Kashmir, India's northernmost state.

Many people call Lhadak 'Little Tibet' because the majority of its population are Tibetan Buddhists. Our trip was occasioned by our forthcoming wedding and was meant to be a kind of premarital honeymoon to deepen our connection and celebrate our commitment.

In Manali's main market Mary Ann found a tailor to alter some dresses she'd purchased, and when she told the friendly tailor that we were on our way to Ladakh the woman replied, "You must meet my mother, Sonam Zangmo Kuldán. She lives in Leh and is a famous lhamo: you go meet her and tell her I sent you. I will write her name and address on my card." Mary Ann took the card and thanked her, promising we'd look up her mother.

I was excited by the idea of meeting her and perhaps getting a healing from a Ladakhi lhamo. For

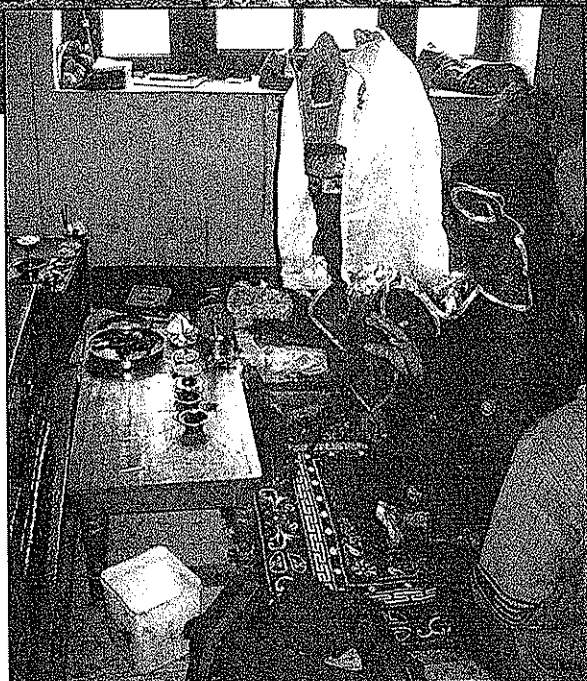
many years I'd had pain and swelling in the right side of my abdomen. After several tests, doctors still didn't know what was wrong with me, and while medicines provided some relief, they offered no permanent cure. Perhaps a lhamo would have better healing 'karma'! Besides, it would be a real adventure to experience a Buddhist shaman!

THE ROAD TO LEH

The two-day jeep journey was long and hard, but breathtakingly beautiful. Younger, sturdier travellers opt to do the trip in nineteen straight hours of driving, but we thought it best to do the more humane two-day version that included an overnight stay at a campground high in the mountains.

Our jeep was driven by an intrepid and skilled driver who sometimes sped and sometimes crawled along the one-lane road that wound through some of the tallest and most majestic mountains in the world. The road is only open for three months of the year; the rest of the time it is buried under deep snow and lashed by freezing winds.

As he approached every turn, our driver honked his high-pitched horn to let oncoming traffic know he was coming. Whenever there was traffic, we would swerve to the left edge of the road, which was also the edge of the cliff, and somehow two



vehicles would manage to pass one another - by the breadth of a few hairs! Not all vehicles were so lucky: we saw several trucks that had gone off the road and plummeted thousands of feet to their demise.

Not only were our lives in constant danger, but our bodies were also subject to the painful, incessant ups and downs of the bumpiest road we'd ever experienced. I felt like a big sack of corn continually bouncing on the not-well-cushioned seat. Several times I told myself, "Just be a sack of corn and surrender!"

On our first night we stayed in a big tent in Sarchu, a mountain town 14,000 feet above sea level. When we arrived after sunset, the

Top of page: the 17,582 feet above sea level Taglang La pass boasts the highest public toilets in the world

Inset: the lhamo at her altar

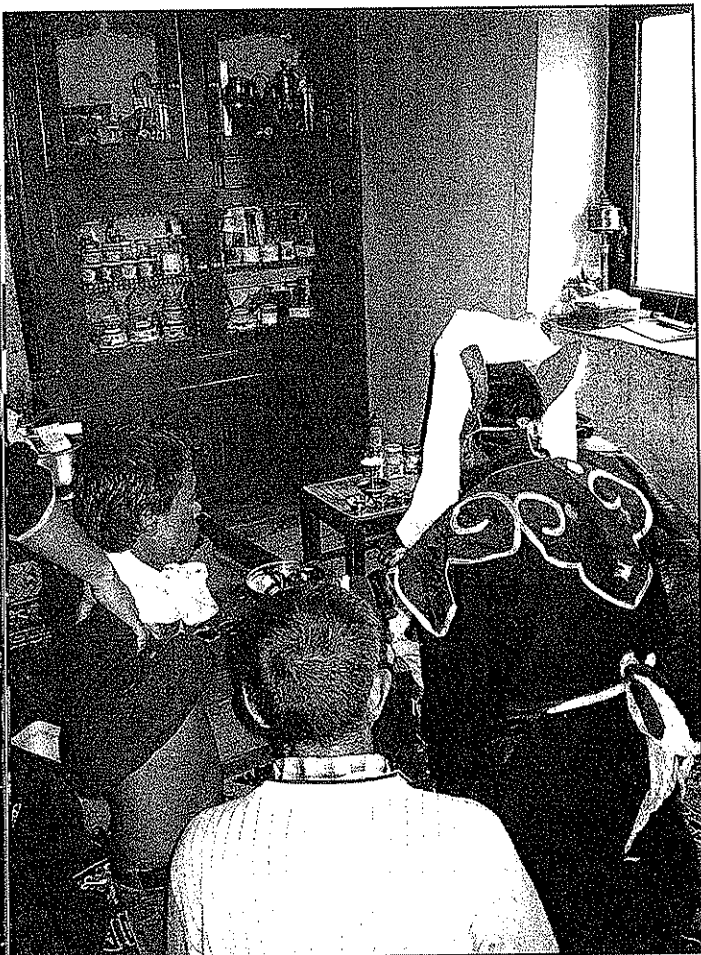
More than a dozen people were sitting on the floor and on chairs arranged around the room. Each person was waiting his or her turn to be treated by the lhamo

camp grounds were lit only by the light of the stars. It was so cold that we decided to sleep in our clothes under the three layers of quilts that were provided. Once under the quilts, however, we were still teeth-chattering cold, so we happily took the old fashioned hot water bottles that were offered to us. The next morning we emerged to discover we were surrounded by still-dark mountain peaks.

As the sun slowly brightened the sky, it turned them redbrown and caused the highest snow-streaked peaks to glisten.

After a quick breakfast we climbed back into our jeep and soon crossed the border into the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Midday we began ascending the steep, treacherous road to Taglang La, 17,582 feet above sea level, the second highest road pass in the world. At the apex of the pass was a small Buddhist temple that looked like a stone tent with supporting pillars. Attached to the temple were ropes that carried prayer flags which flapped wildly in the cold wind.

Below: the lhamo begins to treat a local man who has listed his shirt up to reveal his stomach



Though the area boasted the highest toilets in the world, we opted to go 'the natural way,' behind a huge boulder, and then hopped back in the jeep. Despite the beauty of the landscape all along the way, it was a relief to finally arrive in Leh in the late afternoon.

A MEETING WITH THE LHAMO

During our first few days in Leh we visited beautiful monasteries and palaces, and were impressed by the wonderful golden Buddhas, colourful carpets and tapestries, and intricate thangka paintings. We also attended meditations and talks at one of the main Buddhist temples.

On Friday morning we were ready to seek out the lhamo. A twenty-minute taxi ride brought us to Sabu Chobabas, a sparsely populated village with small stone dwellings scattered over a rocky area, abutting the mountains. During the drive Mary Ann said she didn't need a physical healing herself but wanted to ask about the auspiciousness of our wedding date.

The driver dropped us off and we walked through the cluster of buildings to the house of Sonam Zangmo Kuldán. The simple stone house was situated right up against the mountain, and as we entered the hallway, a young Buddhist nun - who spoke some English - led us into the room where a healing session was already in progress.

In the crowded room Sonam was sitting on the floor next to a small altar and chanting in a raspy, haunting voice. Her eyes were closed, and there was a great energy in her voice and bodily movements. Intuitively, I sensed she was 'the real thing' - a woman with intense spiritual and healing power. I was both excited and nervous. I knew I was stepping into the potent and unpredictable realm of the numinous. An old man, perhaps Sonam's husband, was assisting her; near him incense was burning in large charcoal burners, filling the rooms with its woody aroma.

Sonam was a short thin woman with brown, worn skin. She appeared to be in her seventies and was wearing a poncho-like ceremonial dress. When she opened her eyes, I saw they were small, bright and intense. More than a dozen people - mostly Ladakhi women and children - were sitting on carpets and cushions on the floor and on chairs arranged around the edge of the room. Each person

waiting for their turn to be treated. Also present were a few Europeans.

I came to this session knowing almost nothing about what would take place. Though I had a general knowledge of shamanism, I wasn't familiar with Tibetan shamans. Recently, I'd read a brief description of lhamos and their practices and learned that at the beginning of the process, either before or after their patients arrive, lhamos enter a trance. Sometimes, they splash water on their face and then position themselves in front of the altar. Next they pray and chant, ring a bell and sound a drum. They may even roar, or wildly laugh, or hiccup, or make other strange sounds. Eventually, they drop their instruments and put on their ceremonial dress. I was sorry we'd missed Sonam going into trance - it must have been an awesome experience to witness a deity enter her. Much later - after returning to America and researching Sonam's life - I discovered that she had gone through extensive training to become a lhamo and had been a lhamo herself for over fifty years, beginning at age twenty five. Her mother and grandmother were also lhamos.

At the start of each session most of Sonam's patients handed her a white *khatag* prayer scarf, and then bowed and made a prayerful gesture with their hands. She then took the *khatag* and set it aside and worked with one patient at a time for a few minutes each.

A HEALING FROM THE LHAMO

Soon Mary Ann and I were called up to see Sonam. The nun gave me a *khatag* to hand to her and acted as our translator. Mary Ann asked her for advice on creating a happy and harmonious marriage - our wedding day was just three months away - and I asked for a healing of my abdomen. Upon hearing our requests Sonam said that our wedding date was a good time for us to marry, and that we would have a good marriage.

I described to Sonam the persistent pain in my abdomen and she told me I should see an *amchi* (traditional Tibetan doctor) because I had a physical problem different from what she usually sees. For a moment I thought she was going to dismiss me, but then she indicated she would treat me.

Sonam gestured me to sit in front of her. Then she put her face very near my abdomen and began

sucking the harmful energy out of my groin and spitting some kind of noxious liquid into a copper bowl.

With great intensity and gravity she repeated this sucking and spitting motion several times and then asked me to put my head over the incense bowl. She touched my head with her hand and tapped my upper back and shoulders with a chisel-like device that was wrapped with string. When treating other patients, she'd torn off a piece of this string and tied it around one or more of their fingers. Next she blew air, again with great intensity, onto my belly and legs.

As soon as she finished doing this she addressed the entire group and asked everyone but me to leave the room. I was surprised, and a little alarmed by this request, since everyone had been present for the other healings we'd witnessed. I wondered what she was going to do that required complete privacy.

The room cleared out, and just Sonam, myself and her assistant remained. She gestured to me to take off my trousers. Though a little apprehensive, I complied. She then took a ritual dagger that had been heated on the stove and placed it on her tongue and started blowing the steam of her saliva onto my abdomen. My anxiety immediately transformed to awe!

She lifted my underwear a little to blow some of the steam closer to the region where I experienced the most pain, on the right side of the pubis, and then gestured to me to put on my trousers. Once I was dressed, the other people were brought back into the room. A long period of praying and chanting now began, accompanied by bell ringing and drumming.

At the close of the healing session Sonam gave Mary Ann and me little strings to wear: a red main string attached to a short purple string. She explained that these strings had special healing energies in them. She also gave us a small portion of rice to boil and drink and said the beverage would be healing and strengthening.

Then Sonam said, "Your marriage will be good in this lifetime and in the next life time!" Mary Ann and I beamed with delight!

Sonam treated a few more individuals and then concluded her work for the morning. After the last healing session she bent over and hit her back a few times and brought herself out of the trance.

Immediately she became a different person: a warm, friendly, hospitable woman, even mild mannered and a little shy.

REFLECTIONS ON THE HEALING

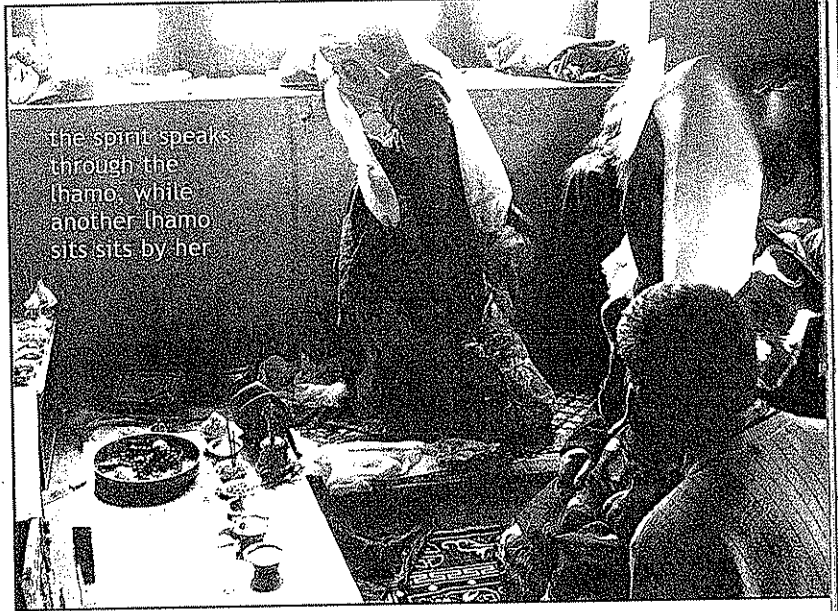
Though at times I felt a little apprehensive during the healing, I remained in a prayerful, meditative state throughout the session. The combination of chanting, drumming and bell ringing had a hypnotic effect and added to my own internally initiated meditation and prayer. Indeed, being present for the healing of others not only gave me a chance to witness their sometimes miraculous healings, but also gave me time to take in the healing effects of the entire process. Overall, the session had a dramatic healing and uplifting effect. It was also specifically helpful to my abdominal problem.

I often felt confused because I didn't understand what was being said, but while my mind was confused, my heart seemed in near constant alignment with what was taking place.

Throughout the session Sonam was rather direct with me, motioning to me where and how to sit or kneel in front of her and when to return to my seat by the wall. Though I wasn't always clear how to position myself or when to go back, it all worked out.

A man from Luxemburg who spoke some English and Ladakhi occasionally supplemented the nun's sparse translations. I wished she had translated more of what Sonam had said to me, but I assumed she'd transmitted the essence.

In the taxi back to our lodgings, we talked about our experience and shared how deeply grateful we felt for partaking in such a powerful and awesome process. Then Mary Ann suddenly became quiet, looked straight into my eyes, and said, "But



the spirit speaks through the lhamo, while another lhamo sits sits by her.

Sonam was only partly right in her divination."

I looked at her quizzically, wondering what she meant. Her tone seemed exaggeratedly serious. Was she joking?

"She said our marriage will be good in this life." Her voice was now tinged with disappointment.

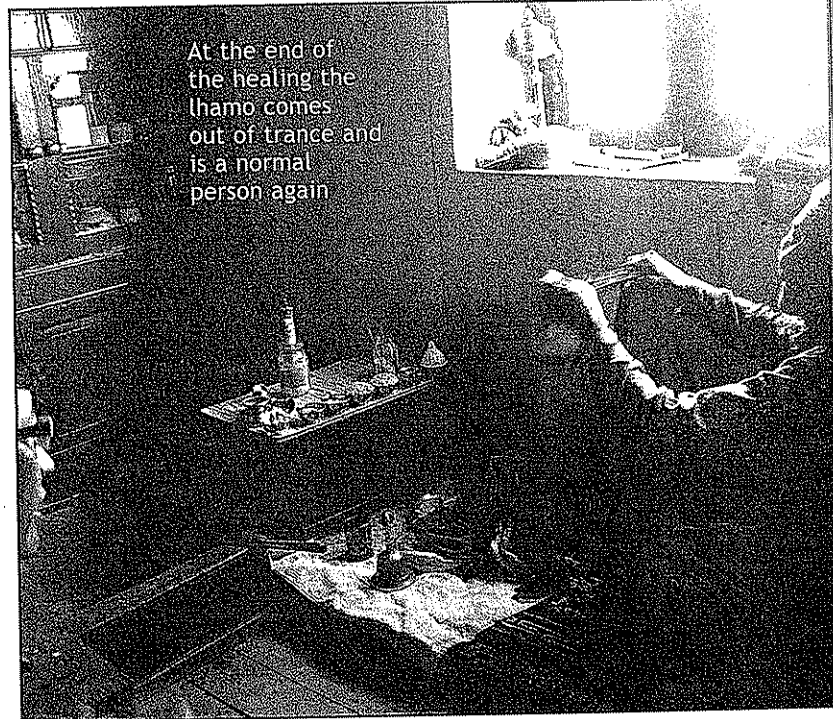
"Yes" I said, still puzzled. Why was she disappointed? I searched her eyes for a clue and detected a little twinkle behind the apparent seriousness.

"Well, the truth is," she exclaimed exuberantly, her face now filling with light and merriment, "our marriage will be good for the next seven lives!"

"Seven lives? Oh, yes, of course, seven! So may it be!" I said, smiling.

Charles Burack Ph.D. is an award-winning professor, scholar and poet as well as a spiritual counselor and creativity coach. He teaches courses in psychology, spirituality, literature and creativity and specialises in contemplative and creative approaches to higher education at John F. Kennedy University California. He also teaches at UC Berkeley, and the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is widely published writer, and the author of two books and many articles, stories and poems.

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At the end of the healing the lhamo comes out of trance and is a normal person again