

## La Gukni: A Ritual to Gather Life Force

The ritual called *la gukni* (ལ་གུག་ནི) refers to retrieving the personal energy collectively called *la*, which is believed to be vulnerable to theft by one of the eight classes of spirits. When one's *la* is taken, it can cause severe illness. In the *la gukni* or 'summoning the *la*', the priest conducting the ritual summons the spirits to return the person's *la*. Those who speak the Tshangla dialect call the ritual *yong ralé* (ཡོང་རལེ).

It is believed that for every stone or tree, there is a spirit that owns it. When the owning spirit is not properly appeased, they get annoyed and cause harm to human beings. Further, it is believed that if the places where local spirits reside are despoiled or damaged without making necessary remedial prayers to the territorial deities, the encroacher will fall sick or lose his/her vitality. Such sickness is considered to be caused by evil spirits who steal the *la* that constitutes a person's vitality and psychological strength. The remedial ritual of *la gukni* is conducted to appease the spirit through offerings and recover the *la*.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> century, King Sindhu Raja (སིང་ཏུ་རྗེ) of Bumthang fell ill, and his retinue invited Guru Rinpoché to come cure him. Guru found out that the King's illness was caused by the local deity Shelging Karpo (ཤེལ་གྱིང་དཀར་པོ), who led all eight classes of demons, demi-gods and spirits in the valley. Shelging Karpo appeared before Guru Rinpoché, saying:

Oh! Great Tantric master!

As the chief of life-owning spirits, I am known as Shelging Karpo (ཤེལ་གྱིང་དཀར་པོ);

As the chief of malignant spirits, I am known as Gangwa Zangpo (གངས་པ་བཟང་པོ);

As the chief of water spirit, I am known as Mu-Ta-Zurchen (མ་ཏ་ཟུར་ཚེན);

As the chief of mountain spirits, I am known as Kebu-Lungtsen (ལུ་བུ་ལུང་པ་ཙེན);

As the chief of za, I am known as Za-Chog-Gyalpo-Rahula (ཀམ་འ་མཚོག་གུལ་པོ་ར་ལུ་ལ);

As the chief of demons, I am Zoraraké, the owner of death;

As the chief of lu (ལུ), I am the big serpent with nine heads;

As the chief of mamo (མམ་མོ), I am Damsi Mamo (དམ་སྲི་མམ་མོ);

The demi-gods visible and invisible are all my subjects. There is no *tсен* superior to me.

This is the *lasok* essence of Sindhu Raja; this I offer to you;

This was in return of his evil deeds earlier and from now on he should not commit such evil deeds.

Thus, he offered the king's *la* to Guru Rinpoché and an the oath to be a protector of Dharma. Then, Guru Rinpoché and Machik Bumden Tsomo went to the Iron Castle (རྒྱལ་པོ་མཁའ་གཟིམ་རྒྱང). There, from a metal casket, wrapped in a purse made of rat skin, they took out

the sok (life force) and put it through the King's nose, while the *la*, resembling a spider (ལ་གྲམ་) dissolved into rays and submerged into his crown. The king then wore an amulet to protect his life and fully recovered from his illness.

During the ritual of *la gukni*, varieties of twig plants are gathered from a specific direction indicated by the astrologer. Based on the instructions, s/he shakes the twigs over the patient's head while s/he whistles certain tunes. The spider which falls on the patient's head is identified as the lost *la*. If it is a black spider, it is considered bad for the patient and the patient will take time to recover. But if it is the white spider falling from the twigs, the lost soul is considered to be recovered. *La* (ལ་), *tsé* (ཚེ) or life, *sok* (སོག་), *wangthang* (དབང་ཐང་) or esteem and *lungta* (ལུང་ཏ་) are intangible cultural concepts known throughout Bhutan and the Himalayas.

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