Whether seen from a Buddhist or shamanic viewpoint, Padmasambhava is a being who is able to manipulate reality and the beings who dwell in it in a very magical way, and there is no doubt that the teachings left by him have great power.

He is an extremely important figure in Tibetan Buddhism, being the tantric Buddha, and sometimes is referred to as Padmakara or Guru Rinpoche. As the ‘First Shaman’ he provides a role model for practitioners and the many legends that surround him link back to the pre-historic shamanic world of the Himalayas.

These legends were recorded by his Tibetan consort Yeshe Tsogyal after he came to Tibet in the 9th century, and his birth was predicted by the Buddha, who, before he died, said that one even greater than himself would be born in a lotus flower to teach the ways of tantra.

**PADMASAMBHAVA’S LIFE**

Guru Rinpoche’s story began at the ‘Ocean of Milk’ or Lake Danakosha in the Land of Odiyana on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where according to legend, in the reign of king Indrabodhi, he appeared miraculously in a beautiful red lotus blossom, as an eight-year-old child holding a dorje (see picture) and a lotus. He immediately began giving teachings to those around.

Indrabodhi the king did not have a son, but had been doing ceremonies and spiritual practices for some time in order to gain one. On the day of a full moon, he opened the doors to his three thousand treasuries and gave all the treasure to the poor and needy until it was gone. But still the poor kept coming, even though he had no more to give.

The poor who had not received treasure told the king that if he did not give treasure to them, then all the giving he had done in the past would be meaningless. When the king heard this he decided to get endless treasure to give away, and so he travelled to Lake Danakosha to seek a wish-fulfilling jewel held by Charumati, the daughter of Naga the serpent spirit.

After he had found the jewel, the king came upon the miraculous child in the lotus. The king was so delighted at finding the son he had prayed for, that he took the boy home, made him a prince and named him Padmasambhava, which means ‘The Lotus born one’.

The prince grew up and married princess Prabhadhari, but in time realised he would not be able to teach and empower people, or bring them to enlightenment if he remained a prince. So he asked King Indrabodhi’s permission to leave the court.

In the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist art he can quite easily identified by the way he sits and by what he holds. A katvanga ( tantric staff) sits in the crook of his left arm, while his left hand holds a kapala (a bowl made from the top of a human skull). His right hand holds a dorje or vajra (diamond thunderbolt), and his hat sprouts three eagle feathers.
He travelled over the whole country, and is said not to have left ‘even the space of a horse-hoof’ where he didn’t walk. As he travelled, he blessed all the mountains, lakes and caves in the land as places where it was possible to gain sacred power.

He travelled to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha’s enlightenment, as well as many other sacred places, in order to inspire others with the Buddha’s teachings. As he travelled he received teachings from many great Buddhist scholars.

He then took princess Mandarava, the daughter of the king of Zohor, as his spiritual partner. The king was outraged, and one day, while begging, Padmasambhava was arrested, and burned alive. But Padmasambhava showed his power by transforming the blazing pyre into a cool lake, in the centre of which he sat on a lotus flower.

This so impressed the king that he allowed his daughter to go with Padmasambhava, and together they went to the mountain cave of Maratika in Nepal. According to legend, it was here that they performed rituals to make themselves immortal.

When they had achieved immortality, they went to convert the people of Padmasambhava’s home in Odiyana to Buddhism. Again whilst begging, he was recognised as the banished prince, and was once more burned in a huge pyre of sandalwood.

Yet again he quenched the flames, and both he and Mandarava appeared unharmed on a lotus flower in the centre of a lake. This time they each wore a garland of skulls to symbolise the spiritual goal of freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth.

He was allowed to remain in Odiyana for thirteen years as the king’s teacher, and converted the country to Buddhism. After this time there are many legends of his travels and his visits to different lands where he conquered spirits and demons, before eventually coming to Tibet.

ARRIVAL IN TIBET
In Tibet, the King, Trisong Deutsen had a longing to spread the teachings of the Buddha, so he invited a great teacher from India, Khenpo Bodhisattva to teach there. As soon as the people of Tibet heard the Buddhist teachings, they wanted to make a great temple. However, the old spirits of Tibet interfered, and stopped the temple from being built. So the king sent messengers to invite the renowned master Padmasambhava to come to Tibet to help them.

The king and Padmasambhava met in the year 800 C.E. at the Tamarisk Forest in central Tibet, at a place called Red Rock. Here Padmasambhava performed a ceremony to bring all the gods, spirits and demons of the land under his command.

He then laid the foundation for the great temple of Samye and employed all the gods and demons who had earlier stopped the building, to help him. In gratitude the king gave Padmasambhava a girl to be his attendant and spiritual partner in rituals. She was called Tsogyal and was in her early teens and already a follower of Buddhism.

Padmasambhava gradually taught Tsogyal all of his spiritual teachings and rituals, and when she had achieved spiritual maturity, she began to travel on her own, gathering followers.

Padmasambhava remained in Tibet for some years, during which time he travelled over the whole country, and is said not to have left ‘even the space of a horse-hoof’ where he didn’t walk. As he travelled, he blessed all the mountains, lakes and caves in the land as places where it was possible to gain sacred power. He founded the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the oldest school of Buddhism in Tibet.

He also gave many predictions for the future, and concealed countless hidden secret teachings and magical objects, or terma. He hid these terma to prevent the teachings from being destroyed in the desperate times to come.

For each of these hidden treasures Padmasambhava predicted the time of their finding, the person who would find them, and the person who would keep the teaching or object.

Some of these terma are actual physical objects and texts (sagter), others are teachings that come through visions (dag-snang), or the voices of invisible beings (snyan-rgyud). Others are ‘mind treasures’ (dgongs-gter), channelled directly through divine inspiration and automatic writing.

Perhaps the most famous terma text written by Padmasambhava is the Bardo Thodol, widely known as the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’. Padmasambhava bound all of the spirits in Tibet under oath to serve the Buddhist teachings, and entrusted them to guard the terma treasures. He also left physical signs of himself at many places to inspire future generations, such as imprints of his body, hand prints and footprints.

When Padmasambhava decided it was time to leave Tibet, the people tried to stop him, but to no avail. And so he left, riding on a lion, accompanied by lots of spirits making offerings.

Below: An Native American eagle’s foot bundle and a dorje to show the similarity between them.
Below: a Kangpa during a ceremony in a Tibetan cave. He is playing a double sided chod drum and bell, and blowing a human thigh bone trumpet called a kangling.

He went to other lands to teach, and eventually reached the summit of the Glorious Copper-coloured Mountain on the mythical continent of Chamara, where he is said to live still, full of compassion for all beings.

Tsogyal remained in Tibet and continued to teach and to gather disciples around her. She is considered to be a dakini (sky-dancer), which is a female deity who represents the feminine principle of wisdom. Because of this she became known as Yeshe Tsogyal - the title 'Yeshe' means primordial wisdom.

THE VAJRA 7 LINE PRAYER

Hung!
Orgyen yul-kyi nup-chang tsham,
Pema kesar dong-po la,
Ya-tshen ch’og-ki ngodrup nyey,
Pema jugne zhey-su trag,
Khrotu khadro mangpo kor.
Khyed-kyi jeysu dag-drub kyee,
Chin-kyee lab-ch’ir shegsu sol,
Guru pema siddhi hung.
*(a sacred sound or mantra to invoke the essence of Guru Rinpoche)*

Hung!
In the northwest of Odiyana
Born on the flower of a lotus:
Endowed with the most marvellous attainment;
Renowned as the Lotus-Born;
Surrounded by many spirits,
I practice, following your lead.
Please come to bestow blessings.
Padmasambhava, Master,
Sacred power please bestow to me.

THE FIRST SHAMAN

Because Buddhism became so dominant in Tibet, the older shamanic folk traditions have, over the centuries, blended with the more dominant Buddhist traditions.

Because of this blending, Padmasambhava - the Buddhist teacher - has been assimilated into these older, more shamanic traditions as the ‘first shaman’.

From whichever viewpoint, Buddhist or shamanic. As the ‘First Shaman’ he provides a role model and link back to the pre-Buddhist shamanic world, and as a Buddhist teacher, he brings magical perspectives into the intellectual and spiritual powerhouse that is Tibetan Buddhism.

HEALTHY EATING

THE VAJRA 7 LINE PRAYER

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Khrotu khadro mangpo kor.
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