

# **Soul Retrieval and Related Ideas**

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## **Soul Loss and the Retrieval of the Elemental Energies**

In the Tibetan tradition, as in many shamanic traditions, there is the notion of “soul loss.” Although this is an imbalance of the elements, it is greater than the imbalances suffered in normal life. It is a question of degree. Soul loss is a profound loss of elemental qualities and a condition of extreme imbalance that usually, though not always, is caused by traumatic external situations and beings.

We say that the soul can be stolen by malevolent beings of the eight classes. What this means is that negative external beings and forces can damage our capacities for positive human qualities. When these qualities are lost, they can be retrieved through the practice of soul retrieval. “Soul retrieval” is how I am translating *la lu* (*bla bslu*). The ritual is complicated and if one is truly interested in learning it, one must find a qualified master and receive the instructions over a period of time. What I am teaching here is related to soul retrieval, but is a different practice, the “retrieval of the elements” (*byung ba’ i bcud ‘dus*).

Sutra, tantra, and the shamanic vehicles include practices to reconnect us to the positive qualities. This process is not just about having pleasant experiences; it is about connecting to deeper aspects of ourselves. Although ultimately we need to go beyond the dualism of positive and negative, until we actually do, positive qualities lead us closer to the experience of the base of existence, while negative qualities distract us and lead further into abstraction.

When the elemental qualities are lost, there is a flattening of experience, a loss of richness and resonance. This is similar to the experience of a broken heart. A man or woman loses a spouse or partner in a shocking way, is betrayed or abandoned, and he or she closes the heart. This is a familiar theme in novels and movies: the person can’t love because of the fear of being hurt again. The same kind of inner damage can happen when someone loses a child, is raped, witnesses brutality, is subjected to brutality, goes through a war, is in a car accident, or loses a house – the catastrophes and calamities that fall upon us humans. The shock to the soul overwhelms it with fear, loss, or some other powerful emotion and, and the result is the loss of positive qualities, the loss of life-force and vitality, the loss of joy and empathy. It may also result in physical frailty and the loss of sensory clarity.

The loss can happen all at once – as in the case of a single devastating incident – or over time when there's a traumatizing or dehumanizing environment. In the shamanic view, the loss in both these scenarios is always related to negative spirits. In the West it is understood that when we are physically or psychically weakened, we become more susceptible to infections from bacteria and virus; we are also more susceptible to the influence of non-physical beings. Whether we're damaged by non-physical negative forces or external events such as an accident or illness, the damage can be the same: the loss of capacities, of elemental energies. In other words, soul loss.

After an accident, for instance, an individual may experience lassitude [weariness], a loss of inspiration and creativity, or a loss of vigor. This condition may heal naturally, but if it doesn't, if the fire energy has been lost, it can become chronic. This may show up in work and in relationships, and may manifest in the body as an illness and in the mind as a disturbance in cognitive activity. The accident is the apparent cause of the loss, but the actual loss either can result directly from trauma or can come as the person is weakened and vulnerable to malevolent external beings. In either case, the damage is rooted in the soul.

Perhaps when you put your attention in the area of your heart chakra, for example, you feel nothing. Just keep it there. You may feel strange sensations. You may feel pain. If you have been hurt in such a way that your soul is damaged, one of the chakras may be closed. You may need to spend a long time feeling your way in to it. This shutting down can be minor – an instinct to close yourself off for protection – or it can be more serious and manifest as a chronic lack of capacity.

Soul loss can appear as depression. Or, if earth is lost, as anxiety. If fire is lost, it may show as dullness. And so on. Traditionally the symptoms of soul loss are said to be paleness, a loss of color in the face; a lack of vitality; and inability to concentrate, and perhaps an inability to walk well. Focus is lost in physical, emotional, verbal, and mental behavior. People may feel weak. They can't function the way they did before. They can't think clearly. This state can continue until the loss manifests as a more substantial disease in the body.

In traditional Tibetan culture, when people begin to suffer from this kind of condition, they ask for a divination, considered an important means to diagnose the source of energy disturbances and to indicate what can be done to heal those disturbances. Divination sometimes suggests the need for a soul retrieval. In other cases, even without divination, people may feel that a soul retrieval is warranted. They then ask a lama or yogi to perform the ritual for them or, if they know how, perform the ritual for themselves.