

The Mandala of Dance

Story and photographs
by Karen Greenspan

When the plane descended through the clouds and down into the Paro Valley, it looked as though the wing would surely brush against the steep, rocky mountainside. As our bird began her carefully calibrated dance with the mountains, Bhutanese flute music piped in over the intercom. I was back!

Bhutan had been tugging at me ever since my husband and I left its airspace after our visit a year ago. The size of Switzerland, with a population of less than 800,000, Bhutan is nestled between Tibet and India—a country so small a world atlas may only have room to spell out “Bhu.” It originally

attracted me because of the natural beauty of its ever-present guardians, the Himalayas. Then I fell in love with its political discourse and its colorful culture. With that in mind, I crafted an itinerary for us that would include attending Paro’s *tsechu*, or sacred dance festival honoring Guru Rinpoche, the saint who played a pivotal role in bringing Buddhism to Bhutan from India. We would also hike in the rhododendron-filled forests during April. But for me, having grown up in the midst of an international folk dance circle and spent years

performing and teaching folk and modern dance, the highlight of the journey would be to study Bhutanese folk dance at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts.

The morning after our arrival we joined the throngs making their way to the outdoor grounds beside the Paro Dzong (great fortress and monastery) for the Paro Tsechu. We mingled with young kids with their friends, old folks—their teeth stained red from chewing betel-nut—grasping prayer wheels, young women carrying babies in woven wraps, men dressed in the traditional *gho* (a knee-length, colorfully woven belt-

ed robe) clutching their cell phones, and red-robed monks. The crowd was abuzz in anticipation of the festival’s processions, sacred dances (both dramatic and ritual ones), folk dances, and the climactic unfurling of a gigantic cloth mural of Guru Rinpoche.

The tsechus of Bhutan are colorful spectacles that meld country fair, family picnic, historical reenactments, monks’ ritual and ceremony, and collective meditation. Their main attractions are the *cham*, or sacred dances, many of which teach compassion for all sentient beings or reenact stories about saints and deities. Originating as much as 1,300 years ago, *cham* are performed by masked dancers who wear decorated silk costumes and sometimes carry and play drums, cymbals, or bells. The dancers are accompanied by monk musicians chanting and playing long horns, clarinets, cymbals, drums, and conch shells.

In anticipation of the trip, I had prepared myself for the festival by spending hours at the library viewing the Bhutanese Dance Database, which was designed by Gerard Houghton, director of Special Projects at October Gallery in London.

It is a central piece of the Bhutan Dance Project undertaken by Core of Culture, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving ancient dance. When we arrived at the Paro Tsechu, I was delighted to learn we would be seeing a very famous three-hour dance called *Raksha Mangcham* (Dance of the Judgment of the

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In the Bhutanese city of Punakha, a jester provides comic relief at a tsechu, or sacred dance festival. Tsechus honor Padmasambhava, known as Guru Rinpoche, the eighth-century saint who played a major role in introducing Buddhism from India into Bhutan. The jester's red mask represents an Indian teacher.



Dead). This dramatic work tells the story of wandering in Bardo, a dreamlike, in-between state that Buddhists believe all beings traverse after death before their next rebirth. There they are judged by the Lord of Death to determine whether they will be liberated to higher realms of existence upon their reincarnation.

The Master of Ceremonies for this courtroom drama is the Raksha, an ox-masked dancer who represents the Minister of Justice. The dance includes a scary-looking prosecutor, a white-masked defense attorney, a black-robed criminal, a red-robed righteous man (dressed like a Buddhist monk), a full jury of animal-masked dancers holding symbolic props (a set of scales, a mirror of fate), and an oversize costume-puppet of the Lord of Death with his attendants and angels. The Bhutanese believe that by viewing this *cham*, they will become aware of what to expect upon death and won't be frightened by the deities they will encounter.

One of the more comical moments of the performance occurred when the villain tried to make a run for it and escaped into the audience. All the ministers of the court ran after him until they hauled him back onstage to stand trial. He pulled

At the Paro Tsechu, below, the Lord of Death—part costume, part puppet—presides as the judge in the cham, or sacred dance, called Raksha Mangcham (Dance of the Judgment of the Dead). This dramatic work tells the story of a soul, in this case a villainous one, whose merit is being weighed before rebirth. Below right: Animal-masked dancers represent the jurors. The Bhutanese believe that by viewing this work, they will be better prepared for what to expect upon death.

this trick three times! Evidently this varies from one performance to another. He was eventually convicted and dragged off on a long black cloth runner to a “lower realm.”

It is a wonderful quality of the Bhutanese people that they do not take themselves too seriously. In the midst of the sacred *cham* there are always jesters in bright-red masks poking fun at the dancers and audience members alike. In addition to carrying out their useful function of fixing loose or crooked costumes on the dancers, they romp around performing slapstick routines, hitting up tourists for donations, and bopping people playfully over the head with large wooden phalluses.

Buddhism was introduced into Bhutan in the seventh century when the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo, a zealous convert to Buddhism, built 108 Buddhist temples across the Himalayan region, including two in what is now Bhutan. Buddhism gradually began to replace and absorb the indigenous religious practices, and a century later solidified its hold when Padmasambhava, better known as Guru Rinpoche, was invited to Tibet and Bhutan. The Bhutanese believe he trav-

eled throughout the region performing miraculous feats (flying on the back of a tigress, subduing opposing deities by performing *cham*, and converting enemies to eternal protectors of Buddhism).

Guru Rinpoche was a practitioner of a new school of Buddhism called Vajrayana or Tantra (the diamond path or thunderbolt path). Tantric Buddhism is based on belief in the possibility of accelerated progress toward enlight-

Buddhist values and philosophy are woven into the fabric of the Bhutanese people's day-to-day life and politics. The Buddhist pursuit of promoting personal and societal happiness, as a mechanism for the practitioner's liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth, has led this modern nation to embrace a governmental-economic policy that they call—using the English term and acronym—Gross National Happiness (GNH). This policy provides explicit criteria to guide

Chung Zam Cham (Dance of the Four Garudas): This cham reenacts how Guru Rinpoche is believed to have manifested himself as a mythical bird known as a garuda to subjugate evil spirits.



and measure the growth and development of the country.

Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy in 2008 at the bidding of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck (who abdicated in favor of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck). One of the former king's four queens (all sisters), Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, has explained GNH as follows: "GNH is based on the conviction that material wealth alone does not bring happiness, or ensure the contentment and well-being of the people; and that economic growth and 'modernization' should not be at the expense of the people's quality of life or traditional values."

At the core of GNH are four priorities—equitable and sustainable development; protection of the environment; the preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage (both material and "intangible"); and provision of good, responsive governance. The tsechus, with their *cham* and other elements, are an example of the intangible cultural heritage that GNH seeks to nurture and protect.

Some *cham*, passed down for generations, are tantric rituals through which Buddhist saints are believed to have transformed themselves into deities to overcome evil forces. Some are per-

formed, according to tradition, just as Guru Rinpoche first demonstrated them 1,300 years ago. Before performing these ritual dances, the monks undertake deep meditation and transform themselves into an embodiment of the deity they will represent to the public. By wearing the costume, carrying the unique ritual instruments in their hands, performing *mudras* (sacred hand gestures), and reciting mantras, and by developing focused concentration, the dancers channel the deity and remain undistracted by extraneous thoughts or external occurrences.

Other *cham*, called Revealed Treasure Dances, are considered to have been discovered from texts that Guru Rinpoche intentionally hid all over the landscape of the Himalayas or in the minds of his disciples, in anticipation of the people's spiritual needs in later times. Various saints and lamas have long been revered for having discovered these concealed texts, sometimes through visions or dreams. As emissaries of Guru Rinpoche, they had the legitimacy to act as innovators. One of the most beloved and influential treasure revealers was Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), who is credited with transmitting *cham* masterpieces from his visions. Not only did he teach these dances to monk dancers, but he also encouraged the performance

of *cham* by lay people. Another fifteenth-century treasure revealer dreamt how the dance medium could be used to instruct about the deeper mysteries of Buddhism.

Still other *cham* reflect sacred biographies. An example is the Dance of the Stag and Hounds (*Shawa Shakhi Cham*), a famous dance-drama about how the master yogi Milarepa (c. 1052–c. 1135) converted a non-Buddhist hunter into a religious man. Although the tantric dances are performed by monks, laypeople traditionally perform Revealed Treasure Dances and biography-based dances. All three are deemed equally sacred in terms of generating merit for the performer and viewer. The mere viewing of these sacred dances offers the potential for transcendence.

One of the tantric visual aids for meditative practice is the *mandala*, which means "circle." In Buddhism it represents the entire sacred universe, through a series of concentric circles or arcs surrounding a deity. In his book *Art of Tibet*, Robert E. Fisher explains that "the effectiveness of the mandala, as a device for leading the initiate further into the realization of the nature of existence, is produced by the sheer repetition of forms, the symmetrical harmonies that impart a vision of the structure of the universe." And in *Invoking Happiness*, a colorful guide to the tsechus, Khenpo Tashi, director of the National Museum of Bhutan, says that "to be effective, and meaningful, the dance must be seen as a mandala."

When I questioned Joseph Houseal, executive and artistic director of Core of Culture, about what aspect of *cham* was the mandala, he responded that the whole thing was, that it "has all the qualities, geometric and transformative." The structure of tantric *cham* echoes the formal structure of a painted mandala. The dancers enter the ground of the performing arena and circumambulate clockwise, creating the form of a sacred mandala, sealing

The Dance of the Eight Manifestations (Guru Tshengye Cham) concludes with a procession featuring Guru Rinpoche and his entourage circumambulating the dance space. He is then seated on an elevated platform, and devotees line up to receive his blessings and sacred prayer cords.



Middle school boys, left, sing and rehearse a folk dance in preparation for the king's birthday celebration, a national holiday. Below: Girls organize to practice their dances—and, like the boys, do so eagerly without adult supervision.



the boundaries to keep out hostile forces and empowering the circumscribed space. The positioning of the dancers in the performance space replicates the deities' positions in a mandala diagram. And just as in the conclusion of a sand mandala ritual, in which the mandala is dismantled and the sand grains are poured into the river as a reminder of the impermanence of all things, the *cham* mandala dissolves. The dancers position themselves in a final mandalic floor design before exiting with a purposeful movement phrase, one by one or two by two, across the sacred space—until it is again empty.

When my guide, Younten Jamtsho, took me to the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA) headquarters in the capital city of Thimphu, we met the assistant principal, Tshering, in the parking lot. I imagined I would be taking dance lessons with the regular academy members. I was quite surprised to learn that four private sessions had been arranged for me.

Tshering proudly explained that the academy was created in 1954 by King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928–1972) to provide formal training for the lay masked dances. Its mandate was to preserve the traditional songs and dances





In the sports stadium in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, high school students complete their dance for the king's birthday celebration. To represent the nation's policy of Gross National Happiness, they spell out the letters GNH.

of Bhutan, and so folk dance was added to the curriculum in 1970. The king was also responsible for the addition of folk songs and dances to the tsechu schedule. Now it is common practice to alternate folk songs with sacred dances within the tsechu programs, creating a more dynamic and entertaining atmosphere.

My private lessons were with Bhutan's "living cultural treasure" Tshering Dorji, the nation's folk dance choreographer. I found him to be a stocky young man with the grace of a gazelle and the patience of a saint. He always arrived formally attired in his *gho*, knee socks, and very fine dress shoes. We were joined by two musician accompanists and the assistant principal. Each session was an intense three to four hours during which Tshering Dorji taught me the dances while he sang the folk songs, the musicians played, and the assistant principal translated and made clarifications. I eagerly anticipated the "tea-and-biscuits" break, when I could get off my aching feet and ask questions while catching up on my dance notations.

I asked to learn a sampling from the three categories of folk songs that can be danced—*zhungdra*, *boedra*, and *zhey*. I learned a lovely *zhungdra* (classical dance) about the black-necked crane, a rare and endangered bird that features in much Bhutanese folklore. The dance is simple (only three steps repeated many times) and the tune almost hypnotic (as the melody has no rhythm). As I extended my arms sideways performing a slow wing-fluttering movement, I felt like a Bhutanese "Dying Swan." I then learned that there was also a *boedra* (court dance) by the same name.

At the Punakha Tsechu, men and women from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA) perform a *boedra*, or court dance. Although *boedra* and other types of folk dances are not sacred, as are the *cham*, viewing them bestows blessings.

That dance, by contrast, was dauntingly complicated, and so, I decided, best saved for my next trip.

The *zhey* are regional expressions of praise and spiritualism identified with the coming of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan reincarnated lama who came to Bhutan in 1616 and is credited with unifying the country while defeating Tibetan invaders. Long songs that alternate slow and fast rhythms, they are sung and danced by men in specified regional costumes during their local festivals. A presentation of *zhey* was featured at the recent royal wedding of the popular young king. Because Bhutan is a culture that reveres and ennobles those who perform the dances, the honored bridegroom also learned a *zhey*, from my very own Tshering Dorji, to perform before the public.

Although *zhey* are dances traditionally performed by

men, Tshering Dorji was perfectly happy to teach me one. There are four main *zhey* from four different regions of the country. After watching him demonstrate each, I chose to tackle Nob Zhey, which originated in the town of Trongsa and is performed at their sacred festival. I loved how the dance starts as a slow, stately processional and then gradually transitions into a turning, jumping, twirling, and clapping tour de force.

Some Bhutanese folk dances are simple and repetitive but others are quite complex, with very little or no repetition. Some continually change floor patterns: two lines enter, form a circle, break into partners, form two concentric circles (one of men and one of women), merge into one circle, break into two lines, exit! I found the men's legwork more energetic and interesting than the women's, probably because women are constrained by wearing the *kira*, the traditional long, straight, floor-length wraparound skirt.

The steps continuously flow, with the only complication being that frequently the foot is placed on the floor without bearing any weight. I was never really sure whether to tap or stand on my foot. Hand gestures are quite intricate, and finger placement is precise. The academy artists explained that the hands and arms frequently press down or away from the body, which represents pressing away evil and negativity. When palms are uplifted with arms extending to the front or sides, it represents offering or supplication.

I was determined to show up for my lessons at the academy with each previous day's material under my belt. So at night I practiced in our hotel room, using the video record-

ing my husband was making during the sessions along with the detailed notes I had taken. As I viewed the videos, I perceived a difference between the way my instructor held his fingers in a particularly important hand position and my own attempts, but correcting it was eluding me.

Then one day when we were driving along the highway, our driver had to stop at a roadblock that would not open for twenty-five minutes. We got out of our van to stretch our legs, and I decided to use the time to practice the dance I had just learned. All of a sudden the middle-aged driver, Dawa, came running over to correct my hand and finger positions. He was quite emphatic and precise about my finger placement! His intervention was invaluable: he had pinpointed the discrepancy and explained how to rectify it. Who knew our driver was such an expert? But I eventually realized that everyone in Bhutan is a dancer—from the deified saint, Guru Rinpoche, to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the brilliant military leader; from the young king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel, to my driver, Dawa.

I saw another example of this when we visited a middle school. Schools in Bhutan are frequently boarding schools, because many children must travel from faraway farm villages. It was "back-to-school week," and the students had just returned from their winter vacation. Classes had not yet begun, and the entire country was eagerly preparing for the king's birthday celebration, which is a national holiday. Groups of students were rehearsing all over the campus. Boys belted out the folk songs as they energetically performed their dances; girls were dancing as they sang or practicing to recorded music; coed groups went through their paces in a fun yet purposeful manner—all unsupervised (and these were middle schoolers, around thirteen years old).

The next day we attended the national celebration of the king's birthday in the stadium in Thimphu. Student dancers from the country's high schools performed for government officials, the assembled spectators, and (via television) the entire nation. The final dance presentation ended with the dancers forming the letters GNH in the center of the stadium. Afterward, they invited the audience onto the field to participate in the concluding ceremonial dance, *Tashi Leybey*. The stadium was flooded with participants—old and young, officials and regular folk. They danced together and sang, soliciting divine blessings for long life, prosperity, and happiness.

In addition to observing sacred dance traditions in Bhutan and studying folk dance at that nation's Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA), **Karen Greenspan** has engaged in a series of discussions with RAPA personnel, including the assistant principal, folk dance choreographer, *cham* master, and musicians. A former professional dancer with several modern dance companies in New York City, where she lives, Greenspan spent many years performing and teaching international and Israeli folk dance.

