

# Social Change, One Step at a Time

Buddhist nuns in Nepal are empowering women through their social action programs and through dance.

By Karen Greenspan



*Drukpa nuns performing a dakini dance, which represents the feminine principle, wisdom, in Tantric Buddhism*

Dancing nuns may seem incongruous to the contemplative, religious life of Buddhism. Indeed, the early code of monastic discipline has strictures against singing and dancing. But in the predominant form of Buddhism practiced in the Himalayan region—known as Tantric Buddhism, or Vajrayana—all aspects of life can be used to cultivate awareness, insight, and, ultimately, enlightenment.

from streams and paths and advise locals on environmental stewardship. This update of an age-old tradition has been expanded to biking—allowing them to cover more territory in less time. Closer to home—as cited by the Asia Society in conferring on them a 2019 Game Changer Award—“they run health clinics, rescue and treat injured animals, fight against human trafficking, and champion

On the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal, at the Druk Gawa Khilwa Nunnery on Druk Amtabha Mountain, approximately 350 nuns are members of an order within one of the four schools of Himalayan Buddhism—the Drukpa Kagyu (Dragon) Lineage, which has a thousand-year history, stretching back to the Indian yogi Naropa (1016–ca. 1100). The nuns practice Vajrayana and are under the spiritual leadership of the Gyalwang Drukpa (an honorific title) Jigme Pema Wangchen, who is the twelfth reincarnation in the lineage.

The Drukpa nuns have become internationally recognized for their social activism and their rigorous daily practice of the martial arts, which they use to raise awareness of gender-based violence and the lack of gender parity prevalent in the South Asian and Himalayan regions. In the popular media, they are known as the “Kung Fu Nuns.” Because of the increase in rape and sexual assaults in India, the nuns have traveled periodically to Ladakh and Delhi to offer training sessions to young women on self-defense. The nuns have participated in the Gyalwang Drukpa’s annual “Eco Pad Yatra” (walking pilgrimage) covering hundreds of miles, sometimes in high-altitude regions, to clear garbage

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DRUK GAWA KHLIWA NUNNER



Although Kunthub Cham is the dance of the deity Kunthub Gyälmo, or “Queen who is equal to all,” it was only performed by monks until the Drukpa nuns began performing it publicly in 2003.

environmentalism by manually removing thousands of pounds of plastic litter throughout the Himalayas.” They have delivered aid to communities hard hit by disasters, such as the 7.9 earthquake in Nepal in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the Drukpa nuns have attracted public attention because of their social activism and their kung fu skills, I was drawn to them because of another empowering activity—dancing, specifically *cham*, sacred ritual dances that are essential to Vajrayana. For the nuns to be dancing *cham* is more radical than you might think and is an indicator of change in the perception of women’s roles in the culture and region. The dances and other important ritual activities have traditionally been off-limits to female practitioners. That taboo was one of the first things I learned while researching *cham* in Bhutan in 2011: The performers

could be monks or lay practitioners, but always men.

Buddhist nun and activist Karma Lekshe Tsomo, professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of San Diego from 2000 to 2022, made that point in a 2021 talk: “The [Buddhist] tradition has been dominated by male presence and male voices. And this is the perceived order of the Buddhist universe, assumed to be patriarchal.” From the beginning, 2,600 years ago, the Buddha was reluctant to admit women into the monastic order and only did so after much imploring and female acceptance of eight “heavy” precepts subordinating them to the monks. As Buddhist monastic institutions developed in Tibet and the Himalayas, leadership roles in public and ceremonial life and the performance of the most dramatic rituals (such as *cham*) have for centuries been the exclusive purview of male practitioners. This is despite the Vajrayana panoply of female deities and its theoretical formulation of coequal integration of “feminine” and “masculine” energies as necessary to achieve enlightenment. The social and institutional fabric of Buddhism has not always aligned with the theoretical.

Hanna Havnevik, professor of the history of religion at



A "bike yatra"—led by the Gyalwang Drukpa—is an update of the traditional pad yatra, or walking pilgrimage. Along the way, the nuns stop to collect garbage and promote environment conservation.

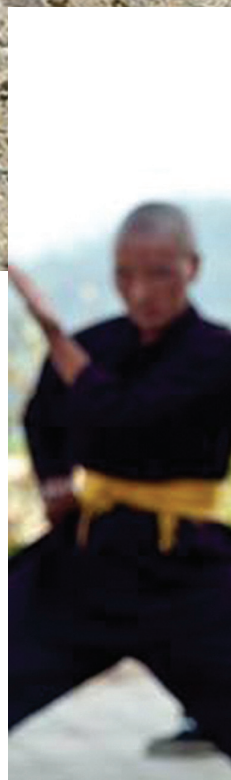
the University of Oslo, Norway, in her 1990 book, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norms and Social Reality*, reported: "There are areas of religious practice that are closed to nuns. I asked the nuns in Tilokpur whether they perform ritual dances, and they answered that they would very much like to but had not received any instruction and had not heard of any nuns doing them. Even though there may not be formal rules prohibiting nuns from performing such dances, one nun said: 'The monks would laugh at us if we started doing them.'" With a history of culturally encoded expectations for females to be quiet, humble, and submissive, even today, these norms continue to influence nuns, limiting their self-concept and aspirations.

The performance of cham is an outward expression as well as an internal technique of Vajrayana, which uses practices of body as well as mind on the path to spiritual awakening. They are performed as a fundamental

component in private, unseen rituals as well as in large, public ceremonies and festivals.

That cham is a medium of power goes back to the first known performance of the dance some 1,300 years ago by the Tantric master, Padmasambhava. A character of mythic capability and import, he is credited with bringing Tantric Buddhism from India to the Himalayan region in the mid-eighth century. Tradition holds that Padmasambhava consecrated the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet at Samye by performing a cham to subdue the forces impeding its construction. Hence, many cham (and Vajrayana rituals) re-enact this seminal act of subjugation, which sparked the flourishing of Buddhism in the region.

Cham dances are accorded potent metaphysical powers. Some are performed with fierce or wrathful energy to exorcise negative forces and are commonly performed during rituals to cleanse the slate for the New Year as well as before commencing a new construction project. They have even been used in rites to repel enemy





armies as a ritual form of national security.

The dances also draw their asserted power through the authority and spiritual capacity of those who are dancing—often senior monks led by the most high-level lama in a monastery or community. The spiritual accomplishment of those performing the cham is key to ensuring the desired benefits.

**I**n 2014, I first came across photos of the Drukpa nuns in what I recognized as dance costumes and dance movements. I naively thought my interest and desire to research their dances would be welcomed. But this was not the case—I had not appreciated the private nature of female monastics or the degree of criticism the nuns have received for going against long-held norms. It took five years until I finally connected with Lopon Jigme Tingdzin Zangmo, the head administrator and cham master of the abbey.

I first visited Druk Amitabha Mountain Nunnery in the fall of 2019 and was met by

when COVID-19 broke out, the nunnery closed its doors. Soon after, I noticed the nuns were video recording their prayer services and posting them on Facebook for their global followers during lockdown. They continue posting to this day. Embedded in these rituals are the dances—if you know where and when to look. Having visited the nunnery again in 2022 and having observed the effects of performing their repertoire of dances over time, I can identify examples of how the dances are indeed transforming the performers, the viewers, and the environment.

**I**n 2001, the Gyalwang Drukpa entrusted the nuns under his jurisdiction to perform the same religious rituals that the monks at his monasteries perform. Two years later, he personally taught the nuns two cham dances that were part of the rituals they were learning. They performed these two cham publicly in 2003 for the first time, at their annual great prayer ceremony, or *drubchen*. One of the most significant religious events on their calendar, the *drubchen* is attended by hundreds of monks, religious masters, and laypeople over a nine-day period of intense ritual, prayer, and meditation. This sacred event is performed to remove obstacles and to promote positive conditions for the year to come.

*The daily practice of kung fu is for physical fitness and self-defense as well as to focus the mind for meditation*



Lopon Jigme Tingdzin confided, “When the nuns first performed the dances publicly at the *drubchen*, some male practitioners and great masters in attendance were shocked. This was unheard of. Female practitioners historically never have performed. And some masters even said, ‘It’s a very inauspicious sign.’ And some denounced it as a bad omen.”

One of the cham the nuns performed at the 2003 *drubchen* was *Kunthub*

a friendly cohort of senior nun dancers, who showed me around. We spent the day discussing the history of their cham practice and the extent of their repertoire. I was set to return to the nunnery a few months later for their annual grand prayer ceremony before the lunar New Year. But

*Cham*—Dance of the Deity *Kunthub* Gyalmo, whose name means “Queen who is equal to all.” The dance is performed as evening descends. A cortege of musicians ushers the dancers into the monastery courtyard with the droning of long horns and the shimmering *vibrato* of cymbals. Two

dancers, dressed in brocade silk robes and wearing fierce-looking red masks topped with a crown of five skulls, move powerfully—hopping and turning about, wielding a sword (of wisdom). Through their movements and meditation, the dancers summon negative energy and then pacify and transform it.

This debut dance of the Drukpa nuns was not decorative or devotional, but rather a bold display of power. Consider the unequivocal message engendered by female monastics performing for the first time this public display of overt, feminine power. From all that has transpired since, it appears that performing *Kunthub Cham* is transforming the nuns in exactly the ways this deity yoga is conceived to operate—a practitioner adopts an archetypal role model of Enlightenment (deity) to contemplate and identify with

in the Himalayas: “Though not explicitly preventing nuns from teaching monks, the rules forbidding nuns from admonishing or reviling monks have had just that effect. The one-way flow of instruction from monks to nuns has reified the nuns’ second-class status in the order.”

Lopon Jigme Tingdzin concluded her story: “Now the Drukpa monks are accustomed to seeing us perform cham as well as act as chant masters for ritual events. Over time, it became accepted and even admired. However, outside of our lineage, there is still criticism.”

The Drukpa nuns have since added many more cham to their repertoire, including several *dakini* dances. *Dakini*, a Sanskrit term often translated as “skydancer,” is frequently portrayed in Buddhist iconography as a female being moving with ease in boundless space. In 2013, the abbess at the

Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in northern India, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, having seen the Drukpa nuns perform these dances, concluded the dances would be an enhancement to the practices of her nunnery. She asked the Gyalwang Drukpa if she could send five of her senior nuns to Druk Amitabha to learn them. He not only agreed but subsidized the nuns’ journey and gave them ten *dakini* costumes, complete with ornaments.

After learning the dances, Jetsunma’s nuns returned to India and performed them in public for the inauguration of their temple in 2014. According to Jetsunma, “At that time about 1,000 people came, including all our religious masters, monks, and lay people from the nearby village.” Noting that they could not rely on such special events to keep the dances well-rehearsed, the nuns decided to make it an annual event for their *Lhabab Duchen* celebration—one of the holiest days on the Buddhist calendar. The five nuns have since taught

the *dakini* cham to some forty or fifty more nuns and have continued the annual tradition. In fact, they have streamed it live on Facebook for the past two years.

In 2014, another lineage—the Karma Kagyu—also invited nuns from several of its nunneries to learn and perform a set of *dakini* dances for an important public gathering in Bodhgaya, India—the *Kagyü Monlam*. The Karma Kagyu nuns have since continued to perform these dances for lineage rituals.

In addition to cham, the Drukpa nuns have added a genre of dance that is transforming the ceremonial practices of the lineage. During my 2019 visit to Druk Amitabha, the nuns performed a delightful dance while singing a joyful tune. It was entirely different from the



Regular plastic litter collection is one of the local social programs organized by the nuns.

in order to cultivate one’s own divine nature. It is ironic that prior to this public performance, the nuns would have practiced deity yoga visualizations, but were not permitted to dance them.

Lopon Jigme Tingdzin continued: “In spite of all the criticism, we never stopped [performing cham]. From there, we started doing it more and more and more. Because everyone understood His Holiness was teaching us directly, there was no choice, everyone had to accept it.” She went on to describe situations where the Gyalwang Drukpa asked her to teach some of the sacred dances to the Drukpa monks—an unheard-of shift in the monastic power dynamic. As Kim Gutschow wrote in her 2004 book, *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment*



A ceremonial line-up during an annual great prayer ceremony, or drupchen

usual cham dances to the accompaniment of sacred instruments and yet, it was not a folk dance. The nuns referred to it as a “dharma dance.” The song and the dance belonged to a genre of poetic expression called *gurma*—songs of realization. They are considered an expression of “audial liberation,” or sudden realization through hearing. This freestyle practice was brought from India to Tibet in the eleventh century and consisted, traditionally, of spontaneous compositions of the great masters celebrating their profound teachings and realizations. Adding their native folk melodies to the Indian tradition, the Tibetans produced a genre of song called *gur*. Both composing and chanting songs of realization are practiced by all four schools of Himalayan Buddhism, although the Drukpa Kagyu stand out as dedicated stewards of the tradition. It appears that the Drukpa Kagyu are the only ones who have a long-held tradition of *gurma* dances. Both the monks and nuns supervised by the Gyalwang Drukpa perform these dances for many special occasions. The Drukpa nuns, however, perform the dances regularly, twice a month, as an offering on ritual feast days. This practice does not seem to be performed elsewhere with such consistency. In this way, the nuns are pioneering a new tradition incorporating the *gurma* dances as a regular feature of their monthly practice.

Each Drukpa nun receives the prefix *Jigme* meaning “Fearless One” as part of her *dharma* (Buddhist) name when she takes her vows. But the name alone does not confer transformation—although it provides great reinforcement. Rather, it is their commitment to empowered action that creates the change. The nuns’ consistent and very public activities, such as ritual dancing, long-distance pad yatras to clean up garbage-filled trails and streams, and community service projects—support inner transformation as well as provide a transformative model for others. Whether presenting martial arts demonstrations to bring awareness to the presence of human trafficking or delivering aid to stricken communities after disasters, the Drukpa nuns’ actions are transforming nunnery life into an inspiring, empowering life option for young women. They are changing perceptions of women and their potential in the Himalayan world—beyond the walls of the monastery. Additionally, the nuns are impacting the survival and innovation of lineage traditions through their committed and creative practices.

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