

# Empowering Women, Crushing Obstacles

The ‘Kung Fu Nuns’ of Nepal create change through ritual dance

**A** GROUP OF NUNS FROM THE almost 1,000-year-old Drukpa lineage of Himalayan Buddhism is advancing women’s equality through transformative practices.

The Drukpa nuns in Kathmandu, Nepal, more popularly known as the “Kung Fu Nuns” because of their daily training in the martial art form, have received media attention and prestigious awards for their work addressing gender equality, climate change and humanitarian crises. They offer community aid and health support and inspire audiences with demonstrations of their martial arts skills, modeling gender equality and female empowerment to young girls and women. They also offer self-defense workshops.

But perhaps most important, they dance. At their monastery, away from the world, they perform elaborate,

multisensory rituals that include the sacred dances of Himalayan Buddhism known as *cham*—despite these activities being prohibited to women in most monastic communities.

In the week following Losar (Tibetan New Year), the Drukpa nuns perform annual rites to promote positive conditions for the incoming year. One of the most significant events is the *drubchen* (an intense period of ritual, prayer and meditation) dedicated to Avalokiteshvara, the Deity of Infinite Compassion. For this all-encompassing event, the nuns dance the powerful *kunthub cham* for the removal of obstacles.

Sacred dance and music are mainstays of Himalayan Buddhist ritual and meditation, used as a means of transforming body, speech and mind into an enlightened state. Divine archetypes embodying qualities like compassion, wisdom, fearlessness and

equanimity are visualized and danced. Kunthub is the all-capable goddess of compassionate energy. She crushes obstacles, subduing negativity and transforming impediments. In this form of Buddhism, the main obstacle to overcome is one’s self-concept as separate from others.

*Kunthub cham* requires fierce energy expressed through movement, music and costumes as well as meditation and ritual. It is performed as evening descends. The cortege of musicians sets a mood of awe, with the droning of long horns and vibration of cymbals inviting the dancers onto the monastery courtyard. Two dancers, dressed in red and blue brocade silk robes, wearing wrathful red masks topped with a crown of five skulls, leap and twirl and wield a sword of wisdom. Through their movements, the dancers summon negative energy, then pacify and transform it.

When the nuns first performed the dance for the *drubchen*, some monks and masters in attendance expressed shock and criticism: Women practitioners performing dances simply was not done. But the nuns didn’t stop. In fact, they added more sacred dances to their ritual repertoire. Now, with access to social media, the nuns are streaming their daily worship publicly, broadening the impact of their groundbreaking practices.

Through this danced transformation of negativity, they literally do just that, paving the way for empowered female religious practice—and for powerful women everywhere.

—KAREN GREENSPAN

◀ The Drukpa nuns champion women’s equality, physical fitness and environmental responsibility.

