

Citation

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The Sacred Dance of Peling Ging Sum

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Abstract

Local festivals of Bhutan are one of the core mechanisms by which a community identifies itself, and one of the key instruments for the communication of societal and cultural values. Sacred dances, called cham, constitute a major part of the events.

This paper explores the Peling Ging Sum, established in the 15th century by one of the most significant treasure revealers (terton) in the Vajrayana Buddhist history, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). Meaning The Three Wrathful Deities of Pema Lingpa and also known as Peling Tercham, it consists of three parts: first, the stick dance (juging) which locates and points out the adversary; second, the sword dance (driging) to conquer and destroy it; and third, the drum dance (ngaging) celebrates victory over the adversary.

Often invoking frightening or wrathful imagery, the Peling Ging Sum employs vivid visual descriptions of action undertaken to cultivate a peaceful atmosphere; elements of which that each serve as metaphor for the removal of obstacles to personal Buddhist practice. Now performed throughout the country, the dance was originally revealed as a divine vision imparted to Pema Lingpa and limited to his home region, the Bumthang district of Bhutan. Through an analysis of its components and their deeper meaning, this research sheds light on the importance of this all-pervasive, yet markedly understudied dance. Further, it

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identifies the effects of its pervasiveness, most notably in changes the Peling Ging Sum has undergone as its performance spreads throughout the country and beyond changes which threaten the integrity of the dance itself.

Significance of sacred dance

Mask dance performances in the Vajrayana world which includes Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, India, and Mongolia are usually known as *garcham* or the sacred movement of the body. The term also refers to three more specific meanings or manifestations; that of the outer, the inner and the secret realms. The outer significance relates to transformation of ordinary body movement into physical mindfulness through the bodily gestures used within the dance which serves as a body yoga which cleanses the negative channels and helps to purify other forms of physical illness. The performance of sacred dance also helps to keep one's body fit for spiritual practice. The inner significance is associated with efforts that transmute the ordinary body of the performer into a deity form through the wearing of specific deity-faced masks and costumes. Through this action both dance performers and spectators become joined together within the mandala and this results in the subduing of malevolent spirits and the removal of obstacles. The secret significance aims to transform ordinary expression of the three doors - that of the body, speech and mind - into the ultimate mandala of Self-Arising Awareness. The sacred dance is considered one of the most powerful and skilful means to liberate all spectators, even including the smallest of insects who also happen to be present at the dance ground, because sacred dances have been developed and revealed from the mind of fully enlightened ones as opposed to just ordinary artists. There are many sacred dances performed in the Vajrayana world during special events or at highly auspicious times.

As for Bhutan, sacred dances are usually performed during the major *tshochu* festivals, at ground breaking and consecration ceremonies for newly built temples and houses. The practice and origin of performing these sacred dances was introduced in the 8th century AD by Guru Padmasambhava and the Abbot Shanti Rakshita during the time of the first Buddhist temple's construction at Samye in the Tibetan desert. Those dances were performed by Guru Rinpoche at that time in order to subjugate and expel malevolent spirit in vicinity where the temple's location was planned.

Later his followers, especially treasure revealers and enlightened masters, discovered instructions for such sacred dances made available both within their own minds as well as hidden in various physical locations such as rocks, lakes, trees, and buried within soil and taking shape as a yellow scroll. Those instructions are said to have been written by Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century and concealed in many different places and areas across the Himalayan world for the sake of all sentient beings. It is also said that he made prayers for these to be discovered in the future by enlightened masters such as Terton Pema Lingpa. He was able to reveal many treasures during his life time and especially the instructions for a particular dance known as the Peling Gingsum, which was revealed from a mirror-like rock of Lhodrak Mindo in Tibet. This text instruction is found in the volume of Lama Norbu Gyamtsho, a collective work of Terton Pema Lingpa.

This dance also has three significant meanings as described earlier, the outer, inner and secret dimensions but for this particular dance, there are three different segments also contained within. These include the Stick Dance, the Sword Dance and the Drum Dance and each segment features its own different steps and movements. The masks used also have different wrathful forms related to different meanings and purposes. For example, the first

segment locally known as *Juging* or 'Stick Dance', all dance performers wear peaceful masks with animal faces led by the snow lion and carry two-foot long sticks. These sticks are used to indicate and point the location of malevolent spirits that the dancers strive to eliminate. Each stick is painted with three different bright colors of red, blue and white stripes which are intended to represent the delusive thoughts of greediness, hatred and ignorance.

An especially malevolent spirit known as *Damsi Nyulema*, is said to cause harmful thoughts and delusions within every sentient being. This is the spirit that the dancers are searching for with their sticks pointing in all directions and trying to locate where the *Damsi Nyulema* spirit may be hiding. There are sixteen dancers in the group and this dance is usually performed in the major Dzongs and temples of Bhutan. However, some of the smaller temples have only eight to ten dancers for this dance. There is always a dance leader known as *champoem* who leads the entire dance and the rest follow according to his movement. There is also an assistant dance leader known as *chamjug*, who always stays at the end of the line and is responsible for assisting the dance leader in guiding the other dancers and ensuring that they follow the steps and body movements in a uniform fashion.

Stick Dance (*Juging*)

As highlighted earlier, while dancing the dancers explore and point in all directions with their sticks and use leaping gestures to rise up in the air. At the end all dancers then kneel down to the ground and pointed their sticks to the earth, but the *chamjug* indicates with his stick that the evil spirit is actually located inside the body and points to the heart three times. This is meant to demonstrate that it is our own delusions which are the real evil spirits that need to be subdued and transformed by following the truth of dharma.

The stick dance also includes three main sections: the first section is a type of divination dance from where the malevolent spirit can be found, the middle section represents the search for evil spirits, and the final one is the pointing and locating of the malevolent spirit and finding of this within the mind.

During this dance when the dance leader asks his assistant where is the evil spirit's location is through indication of the stick while dancing, the *chamjug* replies with hand gestures that there is no spirit in all directions by using an empty hand gesture. They hold their sticks under their arms and clap their hands in order to symbolize destruction of the evil spirit and to awaken it, and then later all the dances will throw their sticks to the ground.

After completion of these three section dance, the performances enter the changing room where they change their masks and hand emblems. It is during the stick dance that they are able to discover the evil spirits through realization and performing of this sacred dance.

Sword Dance (*Driging*)

The second segment of the dance is also known as *Driging* or the 'Sword Dance' and dancers emerge from the changing room wearing red wrathful masks and carrying a sword in their right hand. They all dance with very wrathful emotions and body movements. This dance also contains three sections: cutting, subduing and liberating the spirit. The red wrathful mask represents discriminating wisdom and transforming the great compassionate mind into a wrathful form in order to subdue the evil spirit which could not be tamed by the power of peaceful deities. These masks have three eyes which represent the enlightened ones' eyes which have the ability to see clearly all three realms at the same the time.

During the cutting section of the dance, all sixteen dancers gather again using wrathful steps and leaping towards the centre where an effigy is kept in a small triangular box and which represents the malevolent spirit. The sword symbolizes the self-arising wisdom which cuts through all delusions in a single stroke. The five skull crowns on the top of the mask symbolize the Buddha family of Five Kayas. The second section of subduing is the dance in which the true nature of phenomena is dissolved into one true perfect nature and purity. Following this, the dances once again enter the changing room to prepare for their next performance.

Drum Dance (*Ngaging*)

A few minutes later they again appear but this time wearing a blue wrathful mask and carrying hand drums in order to celebrate the victory over evil spirit through their subjugation. The blue mask represents the true nature of our pure mind which is stainless and spaciousness like the space beyond ordinary thought of cloud. The drum represents the celebration of victory over evil spirit and brings peace and happiness. Each beat brings liberation to all who are present in the dance courtyard and helps to remove suffering and its cause. In Mahayana Buddhist tradition, drum is known as the drum of dharma which liberates all from suffering just through the action of hearing its sound.

When this particular dance is being performed, the dancers meditate on the power of compassion which is the altruistic mind that wishes for others' happiness and cause of happiness. The drum also symbolizes the interdependent phenomenon that everything has cause and condition which influence and bind all events and actions. The drum stick used to sound the drum is viewed as skillful means of compassion and the drum itself is wisdom. The two unite, victory emerges from self-arising

awareness. The blue mask also represents the Dharma Kaya which is the source of all qualities of enlightenment.

Therefore, these sacred dances are not to be seen as rituals to exorcise evil spirits, even though the origins of the tradition as a genre may lie in so-called shamanistic practices. To be effective and meaningful, the dance must be seen as a mandala. The dance ground is considered sacred space, symbolizing the forces present within our psyches through physical form. Mandalas of many types exist, each representing particular deities and their associated psychic forces. To precipitate awareness in the observers and participants, the dance resonates on a physical or body level as well as invoking speech through its verbal liturgies, and those are in turn analogous to meditation practices, which cultivate the mind. Thus, the function of dance - both for dancers and viewers - is one of concentrating the mind and subsequently releasing it from the obscurations of the senses. However, the dance will have no effect unless those involved initiate and propagate those processes that result in transformation within them.

There are three types of masks: wrathful, peaceful and semi-wrathful. Those masks having three eyes are generally wrathful, and also bear five skulls on the crown. The triple eye symbolizes the power of seeing the three times: past, present and future, and discerning them as clearly as seeing an object held in the hand. Five skulls represent the five Buddha families and their associated wisdoms, omnipresent for the benefit of all sentient beings. Two eyes represent the two kinds of knowledge: that of all conventional phenomena and the knowledge of all ultimate phenomena. Peaceful masks embody the limitless compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Photographs



Pema Lingpa, the founder of the dances

1. *Juging*



The Sacred Dance of Peling Ging Sum



2. Driging



3. *Ngaging*





