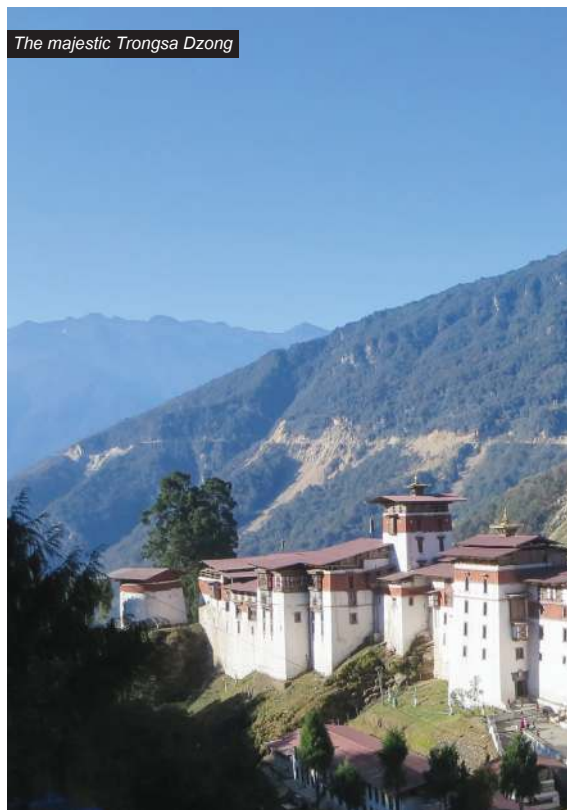




Monk dancer on final day of rehearsal

The majestic Trongsa Dzong



To Trongsa - where the dancing is fit for kings

By Karen Greenspan

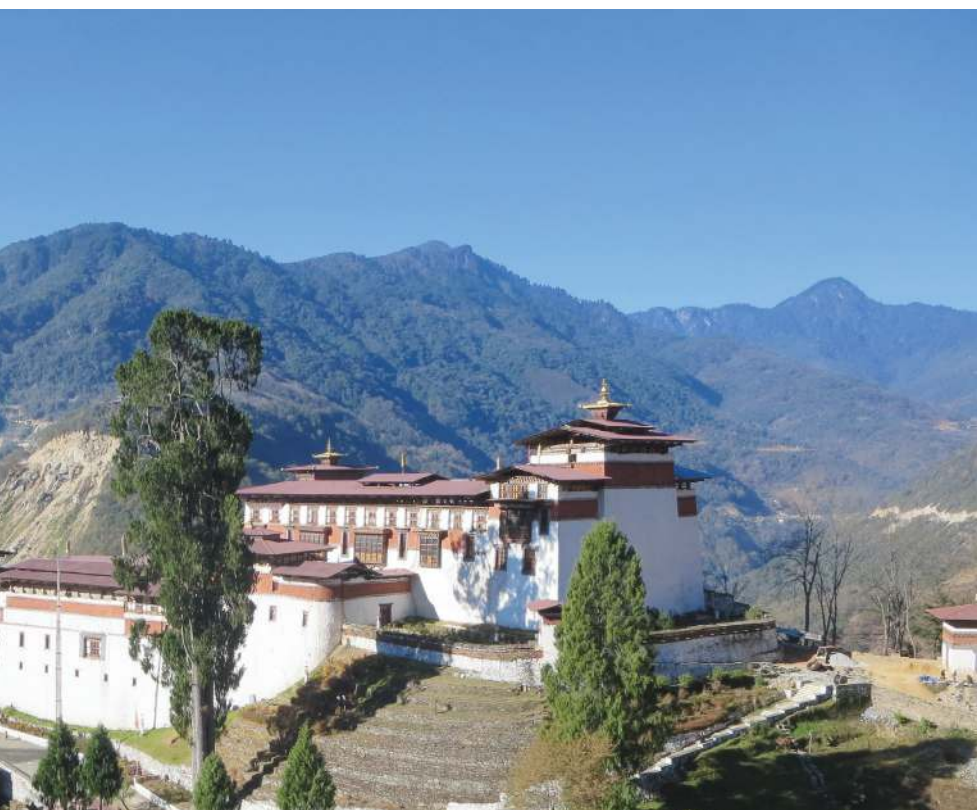
TRONGSA has an esteemed reputation for excellent dancers, unique dances, and fine musicianship. So I bumped along the endlessly snaking, rutted, dusty road to attend the annual *tshechu* (sacred dance festival) and see for myself. Trongsa is perched on a steep

mountainside high above a deep gorge with a rushing aquamarine, glacially-fed river at the bottom. Narrow, terraced plots of farmland line the adjacent hillsides. One would never guess that behind the natural barriers to this fortress town in central Bhutan, such talent and colourful dancing

abound. But the people from the surrounding communities know, and they make the journey dressed in their finest brocades and silks to revel in the richness of this historic dance legacy.

Groups of dancers from the five *gewogs* of Trongsa begin rehearsing for the event a month in advance. The dancers are required to attend hours of rituals, processions, symbolic meals, and courtly procedures in addition to the dancing, which are all part of the elaborately prescribed affair.

Bhutanese *tshechus* are festivals honouring Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), the great Buddhist master



who brought Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet in the eighth century. Most monasteries in Bhutan hold an annual *tshechu* celebrating the Guru's teachings and miraculous deeds through the performance of sacred and folk dances as well as Buddhist rituals. According to accounts, many of the Guru's extraordinary activities were accomplished through the performance of dance. Indeed, the religious rituals and practices he performed and taught frequently incorporated a danced component. These rituals are still performed today. Many of the *tshechu* dances are understood to be the very dances that Guru

Rinpoche performed as he dispelled obstacles, converted enemies into allies, and spread the Buddhist message and teachings through the region. These dances, called *chams*, are a defining part of Bhutanese culture and performed as a regular part of religious life in the temples and monasteries, as well as life cycle events of the local populace.

The Trongsa Tshechu is held in the large courtyard within the imposing Trongsa Dzong, the giant fortress complex that houses both the district's monastery and secular administrative offices. The structure was built in 1644 by Mingyur Tenpa, the

notable official who launched a series of military campaigns that consolidated eastern Bhutan under the leadership of Bhutan's revered founder and unifier, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The dzong's spectacular location on a spur above the Mangde Chu River provided not only a strategic position, but one that was also financially advantageous for the Trongsa Penlop (governor) and the community. The only east-west trail across the country traversed the Mangde Chu River over a bridge that connects to the back of the dzong causing all east-west travel through the region to run through the dzong itself. This translated into immense power and wealth due to its control of all east-west trade and the associated tax revenues.

The Trongsa Tshechu was initiated in 1768 by the third Trongsa Penlop in concert with the tenth Je Khenpo (Bhutan's Highest Abbot and ecclesiastical authority), when they established a monastic community in the locale. The position of Trongsa Penlop evolved to have even greater historic significance for the country because the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan, Gongsu Ugyen Wangchuck (crowned in 1907), had the title of Trongsa Penlop. It is still the tradition for the Crown Prince



Wearing red buffalo masks and carrying the sword of Manjushri, two monk dancers demarcate sacred ground for the tshechu with the cham Shinje Yab Yum

to serve as Trongsa Penlop before acceding to the throne.

Before the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal from Tibet in 1616, the lamas and monastic communities were the custodians of Bhutan's dance culture. With the unification of the country

in 1625-26 under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's vision and leadership, a court culture was developed to promote the performance of dances for the state religion (Drukpa Kagyu lineage) and national occasions. Just a few generations later, the country would fall into

bitter internal strife, but the royal court again took charge of sustaining the traditional culture of the nation when the first king was crowned in 1907. The court dances, called *boecham*, are Buddhist dances performed by laymen (non-monastics) called *boegarp* (courtiers), who were a unit of all-purpose court attendants.

In 1954, Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (r. 1952-1972) established an institution outside of the royal court to carry on the dance traditions, and it later became the Royal Academy of Performing Arts. Because Trongsa is the ancestral home of the royal family, the first two kings ruled from there. The locale, having housed the royal court, developed a highly reputed dance tradition - fit for royalty. That reputation and sensibility holds true today. The *dzong* and its monastery



Monk dancers rehearsing the cham Shinje Yab Yum



Shinje Yab Yum is performed early on the first day of the tshechu



Local dancers perform Nub Zhey, a traditional men's folk dance specific to the Trongsa region and associated with spirituality. Dancer Pelden Lhendup in the foreground



Female dancers sing and dance a zhungdra, a folk dance form that dates from the 17th century expressing respect for the lama

are quite wealthy with a large allotment of productive farmland around the region. They pour that wealth into support of the *tshechu* and even remunerate the dancers who bring its rich dance traditions to life each year.

When I arrive at the *dzong* two days before the festival, the stone courtyard is filled with the swirl of red and wine-colored robes as the monk dancers are rehearsing several *chams* in their everyday attire. Within the *cham* repertoire, there are dances that may only be performed by monastics called *gelongi cham* (monk dances). These are dances that are often part of larger ritual or visualization practices, in which the monk dancer takes on the countenance,

energy, and movement of an enlightened being. They may include the chanting of prayers and mantras; the performance of intricate mudras (hand gestures); the use of religious implements such as a *phurba* (three-bladed dagger), *dorje* (scepter), *damaru* (small two-sided drum with throbbing bead), *drilbu* (bell), skull cup, large two-sided hand drum and stick; and the enactment of offerings and/or symbolic sacrifice.

Even the final rehearsals are ritualized affairs. They are performed before the Lam Neten (Head Abbott of the district) who sits and observes from an enclosed balcony. He officiates all of the ritual aspects of the *tshechu*. The Trongsa monks are excellent

dancers and they appear to love it. During rehearsal, when they are not wearing their performance masks, you can see the expressions of exhilaration on their faces.

Lopön Kuenga Dhendup has been in Trongsa for a month teaching and rehearsing the *chams* for the *tshechu*. He informs me that three days before the *tshechu*, the monastic body begins a ritual ceremony leading up to the event. During the *tshechu*, the monks rise at midnight and perform rituals within the monastery assembly hall from 1:00 to 7:00 am. Minutes later they procession into the courtyard, where the dances before the public begin and continue until around 5:00 pm. Afterwards, the performers, monks, and officials



Tum Ngam Cham, a spectacular subjugation ritual

ceremonially procession out of the dzong.

Because Bhutan is a dancing culture, the Bhutanese use dance to express their most fundamental ideas— moral values, the sacred, welcomes, farewells, and everything in-between. The dances performed at the Trongsa Tshechu offer excellent examples of this.

Welcome and protection

The programme of dance begins with *Jipai Parwo* (Dance of the Heroes or Warriors). The *parwo* are heroic beings believed to populate Zangto Palri (Guru Rinpoche's Copper-Coloured Paradise abode), singing and dancing the teachings of Buddhism within its idyllic rainbow-lit space. Bhutan has a long-held tradition that these fleet-footed dancers, usually

two or four, accompany the procession of an honored guest. They perform a brisk two-step alongside the dignitary (in this case, the Lam Neten) as a guardian escort. According

to oral accounts, the dance has not only been performed as a symbolic welcome, but also for its protective power ensuring the safety of several endangered historical figures over the centuries. Once at the destination (*dzong* dance courtyard), the *parwo* face the podium or honoured guest and sing praises and invocations as they perform the energetic dance with arms uplifted sounding the *damaru* held in the right hand by flicking the forearm back and forth. They wear a full white skirt over their brocade *gho* (wraparound robe— traditional Bhutanese men's attire) and scarves of five colors criss-crossing their chest. Their heads are crowned with a gold-



The wrathful Guru Dragpo ritually destroys the linga (effigy made of dough), into which negative forces have been corralled



An animal-masked lay dancer in Dramitse Nga Cham (Drum Dance of Dramitse)

plated diadem, and they wear a sword slung across their back.

Regional identity and spiritual values

The folk dancers entertain the assembled early risers with a dance that is specific to Trongsa— Nub Zhey. *Zhey* is a genre of men's traditional folk dance associated with spirituality and regional identity. There are *zhey* affiliated with each of the four districts of Bhutan. Nub Zhey originated in the Nubi Gewog of Trongsa as a ritual performance to the local deities with lyrics composed by a man named Aku Tempa, a practitioner of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion. The dancers sing lyrics of praise for the *lama*, the auspicious occasion, the dance itself, the composer (Aku Tempa), etc. as they perform the



Monks rehearsing Guru Tshengye Cham (The Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche) in the Trongsa Dzong courtyard

22 sections of the dance. They perform various sections of the dance at intervals throughout the festival. The initial sections consist of very simple repetitive steps performed in a line. Later, the dancers form a circle as the energy level and complexity builds with deep squats and turning leaps.

Every aspect of the elegant costume is imbued with symbolism. The red skirt signifies devotion to Buddhism while the blue jacket refers to the numerous medicinal herbs for which Bhutan is known. The white sash worn diagonally across the torso represents the vow to adhere to Buddhist precepts, and the fabric headband, or circlet, acknowledges the lama's teachings.

Pelden Lhendup, one of the *zhey* dancers, explained

that only a few years ago the Nub Zhey was on the verge of being forgotten. This became apparent in 2004 when the present King was to be installed as the 16th Trongsa Penlop. The performance of Nub Zhey is an integral part of the ceremony, but there were not enough dancers familiar with the song and the lengthy sequence of steps. For the Bhutanese, an endangered dance is akin to an endangered species of life and elicits an intervention. At the time, the *zheypon* (*zhey* dance leader) taught the dance to enough locals to present at the ceremony. This was followed by a television documentary aired by the Bhutan Broadcasting Service to educate the public about the dance. The Trongsa Administration furthered the revitalization effort recruiting another group of men to learn



Monk musicians play a fanfare on the sacred instruments to herald the unfurling of the *thongdrel* (giant silk appliqué tapestry) on the final morning of the *tshechu*



the Nub Zhey. It was then that Pelden Lhendup learned the ancient folk tradition and now has performed it continuously for the last four years at the Trongsa Tshechu. Nub Zhey is Trongsa's precious legacy; the people are proud to participate in its guardianship and performance.

The female dancers immediately follow performing a *zhungdra* — a folk dance form dating from the 17th century. It is performed by women standing in a horizontal line that faces the shrine or the *lama* in an expression of worship and respect. The dancers connect holding pinky fingers and perform slow, sedate, coordinated movements. The lead singer-dancer, situated in the middle, sets the vocal and

dance pacing as the songs are composed of a continuous, fluid line of sound using extended vocal tones in complex patterns. Trongsa has a tradition of performing *zhey* and *zhungdra* folk forms— not the later, more rhythmic *boedra* compositions that are seen at other *tshechus*.

Ground consecration

One of the first orders of business for a successful *tshechu* is the demarcation and purification of sacred ground. This is accomplished with two monk dances performed early on the first day— Shinje Yab Yum and Sachak Zhanag Cham. In Shinje Yab Yum, two dancers mark off the sacred space and expel all negativity. The two dancers wear red buffalo masks with sharp upcurled

horns and long red and gold brocade robes. They pace the space with arms extended and palms facing outward as if to hold unwanted forces at bay. *Shinje* (Yamantaka in Sanskrit) is a wrathful form of Manjushri, the deity of wisdom. In the dance, he and his consort each brandish a transmutative sword cutting through ignorance, anger, and attachment transforming them into wisdom, loving kindness, and generosity.

This is followed by Sachak Zhanag Cham, performed by 21 monks dressed as Black Hat Masters. "*Sachak*" means "ground consecration." This Black Hat Dance is a reenactment of the seminal *cham* that is said to have been performed by Guru Rinpoche



One of the dancing wrathful deities in Tum Ngam Cham

to enable the building of Samye Monastery in Tibet. When the Tibetan King Trisong Deutsen (742-c.797 C.E.) initiated construction on the first Buddhist monastery at Samye, there was much resistance from the pre-Buddhist entrenched power structure. It is said that hostile local spirits incited by the opposing priests' magic impeded the progress of the project. Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet because of his reputation as a master of metaphysical power, which he employed to subdue the opposition and pave the way for Buddhism to flourish in the environs. Accounts tell that Padmasambhava performed the Vajrakilaya Cham piercing the earth with the *phurba* (kila in Sanskrit) to pacify the local

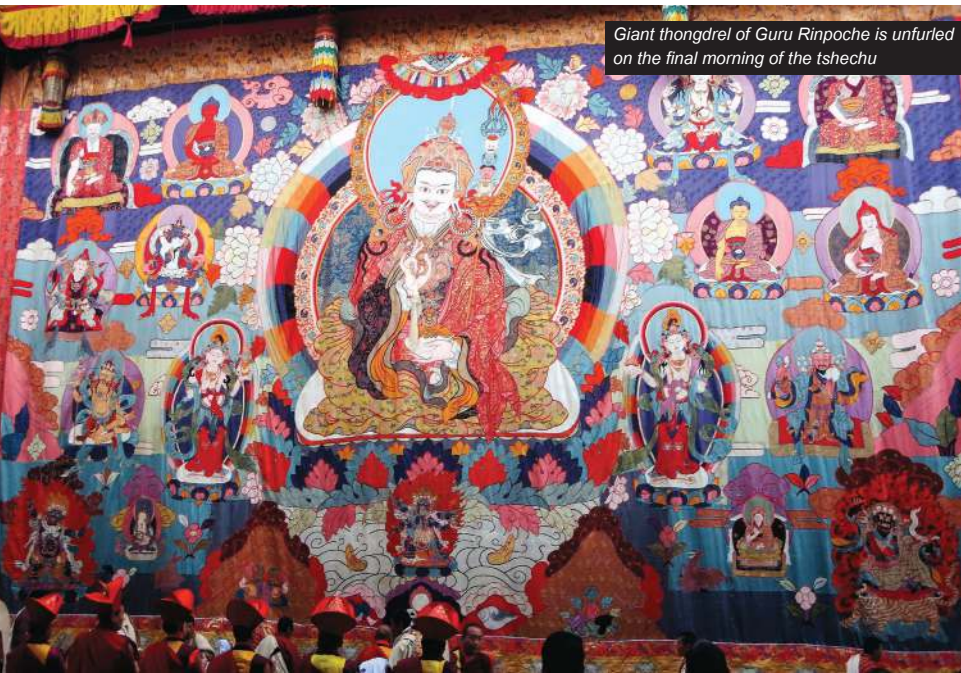
spirits, protect the sacred ground, prevent negative forces from re-entry, and create positive conditions for the building of the monastery. If you inspect a *phurba*, you will

notice that with its three blunt edges it resembles a tent pin, or stake. This may help explain its use in a ritual that stakes claim to the ground.

The dancers wear an awe-evoking costume to perform Padmasambhava's *cham* of taking possession of the ground. It features a long apron on which is painted the terrifying face of the deity Mahakala. The monks are unmasked but, strapped to their head, they wear the defining round black tantric hat that represents a mandala. The cupola and brim are painted with magical symbols to infuse it with spiritual power. The dome is topped with various symbolic elements including a spray of peacock feathers. In the right hand, they hold a *phurba*



Kelcham, a dance of protective deities, performed by lay dancers within the larger cham Pholay Molay (Dance of the Gentlemen and Ladies)



Giant thongdrel of Guru Rinpoche is unfurled on the final morning of the tshechu



The monks' robes fill like parachutes and their billowing sleeves brush the ground as they dip sideward in Sachak Zhanag Cham

with a dangling black scarf. The scarf signifies summoning negative spirits while the *phurba* is an instrument with which to subdue them. In the left hand, they hold a small skull cup—a symbol of impermanence.

The monks' colorful robes fill like parachutes as the dancers spin one way and then reverse. Their billowing sleeves brush the ground as they dip sideward and then they arc skyward. Occasionally, the monks' boots make a "*thwop*" as they throw their weight into an assertive step-hop, to stamp out the negative emotions of anger and grasping.

The Zhanag Cham, or Black Hat Dances, are performed for many different occasions as part of various rituals—offerings, exorcisms, symbolic

sacrifice, *drubchen* (great accomplishment) ceremonies, empowerments, unseen temple rituals for the protection of the country, ground consecrations for tshechus, etc. In earlier times, the dance had associations with the practice of sorcery, and it is famously linked with the assassination of the anti-Buddhist King Langdarma by the monk Pelgyi Dorji in 842 C.E. While performing the *cham*, Pelgyi Dorji pulled a bow and arrow from his costume's voluminous sleeves and shot and slew the enemy of the faith. The dance is used as a skillful delivery system for a range of contents in a variety of contexts.

Sachak Zhanag Cham and Shinjey Yab-Yum consecrate the courtyard to become a sacred

mandala—a divine palace—for the manifestation of the deities and the spiritual transformation of the dancers and viewers.

Subjugation of negative forces

On day two of the *tshechu*, the monks perform Tum Ngam Cham, dance of the terrifying deities, a spectacular subjugation ritual. The *champon* (dance master) performs the role of Guru Dragpo, a wrathful emanation of Padmasambhava as the fierce Vajrakilaya deity, leading his entourage of fearsome deities in a symbolic sacrifice. He wears a terrifying red mask crowned by five skulls and dreadlocks of matted red and blue hair. The dance is considered a *tercham*, or revealed treasure dance, in that it is part of the extensive Lama



Two monks play the *dungchen* (long, telescoping horns) as the terrifying deities dance *Tsechu Cham*

Gongdu Ritual Cycle taken from scriptures discovered by the great Tertön (treasure revealer) Sangye Lingpa (1340-1396). Revealed treasures, or *terma*, are understood to be the teachings of Padmasambhava, which he intentionally hid for discovery by “treasure revealers” in the future when the time would be ripe and people would be in need of spiritual fortification. Many of these revealed treasures came in the form of choreographic visions and make up a good portion of the *cham* repertoire performed in Bhutan today by both monks and laypeople. Lama Gongdu is a fairly central practice in Bhutan and is performed by the monks at the Trongsa Tshechu during their early morning sacraments.

Tum Ngam Cham is a choreographed extension of that practice.

The *cham* begins with the monk musicians playing the *jaling* (oboes) and the incense carrier circumambulating the dance ground creating the boundary of the mandala that the deities will inhabit. The fifteen deities enter one at a time and form a circle. They are costumed in colorful silk robes overlaid with large collars decorated with the crossed vajra, a symbol of unshakable stability. They all wear a terrifying mask and carry a sword in one hand and a representation of a scorpion in the other. The *champon* leads his retinue in the capture of negative forces into the center of the circle corralling them

into the *linga* (effigy made of flour and butter). The *linga* is trapped within a black triangular frame that sits atop a paper drawing of a little person. For almost two hours, the dancers move around the effigy shadowing the movements and gestures of the *champon*, while chanting mantras. The *champon* repeatedly doubles over the figure on the ground and shakes his head back and forth. The drama builds to a climax, during which the *champon* kneels on the ground, puts down his sword, retrieves the *phurba* laid on top of the triangular box, and ritually destroys the *linga*— ultimately liberating it. It is important to appreciate that in the Buddhist view, subjugation of negative forces also refers to overcoming



The Lam Neten officiates in the rituals before the thongdrel on the final morning of the tshechu



Acho the hunter in the dance-drama Shawo Shachi Cham (The dance of the Stag and the Hounds) based on the sacred biography of the 11th century yogi, Milarepa

inner obstacles to spiritual progress, such as the dualistic perception of self as separate from others.

After the paper representation and the effigy in the triangular box are removed, the monks form a tight circle that unfurls into a horizontal line. Then, each deity performs a solo exit dance dissolving the dance mandala. This ritual subjugation is danced to bestow peace, harmony, and blessings upon the place.

Moral principles

An all-time favorite, Shawo Shachi Cham (dance of the Stag and the Hounds), is presented over the course of two

afternoons by the lay dancers. Kesang Jurmey, a local farmer and village committee member, has been *chamjug* (assistant dance master) for the Trongsa lay dancers for three years now. He directs the rigorous schedule of rehearsals five days a week from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm during the month prior to the *tshechu*. A fine young dancer with tremendous stamina, Jurmey is dancing principal roles in nine *chams* this *tshechu*—including the *shawo* (stag) in Shawo Shachi Cham.

This didactic dance-drama is drawn from the sacred biography or *namthar*, of the 11th century yogi, Milarepa, and tells the story of a heartless

hunter who is converted to the Buddhist path of respecting the life of all sentient beings. The scenes with the hunter Acho and his irreverent, silly servant Phento are embellished by a generous cast of *atsaras* (clowns) and filled with slapstick comedy that has the crowd attentive and laughing. The hunted stag dances organic and graceful choreography while the hounds perform a jogging-in-place on tiptoe step that perfectly captures the rhythmic panting of a dog. The animals' movements build to athletic turns and jumps that bring them kneeling before Milarepa, who is dressed in white. The hunter shows up in hot pursuit

and fires off his arrows at the yogi for interfering with his kill. After Acho's arrows fail to harm Milarepa, the yogi sings his song of Buddhist teachings. The hunter repents his cruel past and decides to follow the path of compassion and respect for all living beings. The liberal use of bawdy humor coupled with sublime dancing of the animal characters effectively prepares the audience to receive the intended moral message.

Dance as *thongdrol*— liberation upon seeing

On the final morning of the *tshechu*, the unfurling of the *thongdrol* occurs with ensuing rituals and *cham*. Thongdrol

means “liberation upon seeing,” which is what this giant silk appliqué tapestry of Guru Rinpoche is designed to support. The exquisite depiction of the Guru, his manifestations, and other religious personalities is unfurled at 7:00 am, before the sun's rays are capable of damaging the colorful silken threads. Simply viewing the enlightened beings pictured in the work of art is deemed to extend their awareness to the observer. In fact, the sacred dances themselves are considered *thongdrol*— capable of liberating viewers from the patterns of behavior that cause suffering— for they are embodied mandalas of the

deities and their divine energy.

The *thongdrol* is raised with pomp and ceremony as the monk musicians, clothed in ceremonial robes and tall red hats, line up in a horizontal row facing the tapestry and play a presentational fanfare on the sacred instruments. They and the entire monk body take their places, seated with their ritual instruments, on red carpet runners in a horseshoe formation. The Lam Neten wears a golden silk robe and sits on a carpeted throne at the head of the assembly leading the various rituals while the monks drone prayers and mantras punctuated with the beating of the large round hand



Monk dancer performing the ground consecration ritual Sachak Zhanag Cham



Sixteen animal-masked dancers perform Dramitse Nga Cham, designated by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage



In the Zhanag Cham (Black Hat Dances), the monks wear a defining black tantric hat that represents a mandala and is topped with a spray of peacock feathers

drums and the ringing of small hand bells.

An invitation to be present

In the midst of this religious ritual, three monk dancers emerge from the *chamkhang* (green room) to perform Zheng Zhi Pem—a true gem of a dance. This invocation and offering to Guru Rinpoche is frequently performed during unseen rituals as well as public empowerments. It had been performed daily during the monks' rituals at this *tshechu*.

The dancers represent dakinis, female wisdom beings who help facilitate spiritual progress. They are dressed in multi-tiered yellow kerchief

skirts, colorful silk jackets, and crossed vajra collars. The headdress includes a five-pronged golden crown worn over a tight cap and wig. Skittering into and between the rows of monks and viewers, they perform a high energy two-step drawing arcs overhead with both arms. Then they twirl one way and reverse with their torso tilting sideways. All the while, they tinkle the *drilbu* held in the left hand and rattle the *damaru* with the right. Finally, they astound with repeated explosive jumps in which both arms and both legs extend forward simultaneously.

Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi (Director of the National

Museum of Bhutan) explains that “*zheng zhi*” means “get up and come along.” As these dakinis dart about performing their offering of sublime beauty to Guru Rinpoche, I am overwhelmed at this lightning bolt of an idea—a dance invitation to show up and be present. Now that is a reason to dance!



KAREN GREENSPAN, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the United States and abroad.

Wherever she travels, Greenspan engages with the local performing artists to gain a deeper understanding of the world's dance traditions. A former professional dancer, Greenspan is a frequent contributor to Tashi Delek Magazine.