

# Dancing on a Lotus

A thousand-year-old secret dance practice goes global in the Zoom era.

By Karen Greenspan

log on from my computer at the appointed time. The dance workshop is scheduled for 10:00 A.M. Pacific Daylight Time, but I am on the East Coast. To adjust to online learning from my physically distant location, I have to translate time zones, overcome poor internet connectivity, allow for sound lag, and mentally reverse the mirror image of my teacher's movements. Dancers from many disciplines, schools, and companies have embraced Zoom technology to maintain their practice, keep spirits up, and stay socially connected. I am learning a little-known form of dance meditation—at one time, only practiced in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal—now Zoomed worldwide from a Nepalese Buddhist temple in a residential neighborhood of Portland, Oregon.

Developing awareness of the body to train the mind goes back to a discourse, or sutra, of the Buddha—*Satipatthana Sutta*. It is the foundation of mindfulness meditation training so popular today. Around 500 CE, an esoteric form of Buddhism—Vajrayana, or Tantra—developed in India and quickly spread to the Himalayan region. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the body is considered a doorway to enlightenment. As one of three doors—body, speech, and mind—the body is an immediate receptor and integrator of information and experience that can be used on the path to awakening. Thus, there are numerous physical practices in Vajrayana ritual—including sacred dance.

Many of these dances are a physical expression of “deity yoga.” In this meditative practice, deities are fully enlightened beings—each renowned for individual qualities or functions. During each session, practitioners focus on a particular deity and practice visualizing themselves as that deity with the same divine qualities. This practice is done to reorient the mind and to stimulate transformation

*Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya dancing Avalokiteshvara, Deity of Infinite Compassion*

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to an enlightened state. The method is designed to disrupt habitual patterns of conduct and identification thinking—"I" versus "other"—and to promote a restructuring of mind and behavior.

In the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, deity yoga is danced in the form of *Charya Nritya*—a Sanskrit term meaning, "dance as a spiritual discipline." This dance form has a thousand-year history among the Newar—the indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley. Until recently, this Vajrayana dance tradition was a secret practice known only to the Vajracharya priestly caste. The last name of the members of this caste is usually Vajracharya, meaning "master of the Vajrayana tradition." These sacred charya dances are a component of deity yoga meditations as well as Newar Buddhist devotions and rituals.

On a residential block in Portland, OR is the first Newar Buddhist temple in the West—Nritya Mandala Mahavihara, or Dance Mandal Temple and Study Center, founded in 2009 by Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya.

Its mission is to preserve, explore, and expand Newar meditative arts.

At the age of eight, Prajwal, as he is known, began receiving formal charya instruction, mainly, from his father, Buddhist scholar and ritual master Ratna Kaji Vajracharya. In accordance with his father's wishes, Prajwal has dedicated his life to bringing this unique Buddhist heritage from the temples of Nepal to the world, while main-

taining its original purpose and meditative integrity.

There are hundreds of different life cycle rituals that a Vajracharya priest performs—all accompanied by specific songs and dances. Likewise, every *sadhana*—meditation practice associated with a particular deity—includes a dance component. Each dance, through *mudras* (hand gestures), energy-directed movements, symbolic clothing and ornaments, and the accompanying *charyagiti* (sung praises) invokes and evokes a different tantric deity.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, the body is considered a mandala—a sacred microcosm of the greater universe. Through *Charya Nritya* the entire body is engaged in the process of self-transformation. Every aspect of the dance and vocalizations is conceived to open the body to the energetic flow of compassion. Chanting mantra produces sound vibrations that are intended to open and purify the chakras and channels (internal energy centers and conduits). Mudras and foot positions are tools for circulating energy in the body. In fact, forming the mudras is about opening the mind and

body to the flow of healing energy and compassion—not about making shapes. As Prajwal explains, "Every conscious movement of the hands and feet is *sadhana*. The *dharma* [Buddhist] way is a dance."

Charya dances incorporate the *tribhanga* (triple bent) posture—the body carriage used in classical Indian dance and sculpture as well as in art depictions of the Buddhist deities. The *tribhanga* formation deflects the torso away



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*Manjushri, Deity of Wisdom, with his transmutative sword. Newar legend has it that the Kathmandu Valley was once submerged beneath a lotus lake and surrounded by a ring of mountains. When Manjushri came to the area and perceived its potential for an ideal human settlement, he drew his flaming sword and cut and drained the waters, making it habitable for humans. Because of this, the culture and inhabitants of the valley abound with devotion for this bodhisattva.*



In a residential neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, is the Dance Mandal Temple and Study Center, a traditional Newar structure set in a gardened courtyard with fountains, flowering trees, and statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas—benevolent beings dedicated to aiding all beings on their path to enlightenment—tucked into corners and niches.

from the body's vertical central axis. The weight is shifted so that one foot bears more weight and the hip is laterally displaced, releasing the tautness of the vertical stance. With the plumb line plucked at the heart and away from its central position, this bearing induces and evokes a soft and benevolent presence. The fluid integration of this posture demonstrates Prajwal's claim, "Dance is inner grace expressed outwardly in physical form." In fact, the movements of the dances are so true to the classical artistic renditions, it is as if the deities were animated into living form.

Many of the charya dance movements originate from the physical act of manipulating the sacramental implements in the temple rituals. If you participate in the rituals, you immediately gain insight into the source of many of the dance movements. For instance, some of the gestures replicate giving offerings to the deities—such as playing music on the finger cymbals and drums, or applying colored powders to the statues of the deities

The costume ornaments provide another means to stimulate the chakras of the body with the six *Paramitas*, or Perfections—again, to open the flow of compassion. A necklace is worn over the heart center to release the first paramita of generosity. Earrings encourage patience, bracelets and anklets kindle moral discipline, the belt rouses joyful effort, the crown stirs meditative concentration, and adorning the third eye awakens wisdom. Wearing, viewing, and contemplating costume elements, in addition to physical movements and postures, combine to awaken sensory perception and fuel a shift into one's divine nature.

A year ago, I visited the Portland temple to interview Prajwal and to participate in workshops exploring the theory and introductory practices of Charya Nritya. The temple is a traditional Newar structure set in a gardened courtyard with fountains, flowering trees, and statues of buddhas and *bodhisattvas*—benevolent beings dedicated to aiding all beings on their path to enlightenment—tucked into corners and niches. The building has some exquisite architectural elements brought from Nepal, such as the dark wood temple doors carved with the designs of the eight aus-

picious symbols. The traditional Newar windows, designed to provide cover for secret dharma practice, are carved in an ornate latticework floral pattern, so that practitioners within can see out, but those outside cannot see in. Wooden carvings of the traditional Sixteen Offering Goddesses grace the supporting struts of the pinnacle-topped roof, and temple bells dangle along the roof's edge. In a corner of the courtyard near the temple stands a *stupa* (reliquary structure) filled with texts and other treasures. The adjacent study center (a house) offers a library, community gathering room, kitchen, office, and some guest rooms.

Though the practice of Charya Nritya was always restricted to members of the Vajracharya lineage for most of its thousand-year history, it was relegated to secrecy during the Rana dynasty (1846–1951), which had repressive policies toward Buddhism, as well as overall prohibitions on teaching and learning. Dances were only performed in the presence of small groups of patrons or

al's father began writing articles and teaching the practices in the 1970s, eventually producing a two-volume collection of about 560 charyas (songs and sadhana instructions). Ironically, the Nepalese government has embraced this Buddhist dance tradition as the national classical dance, and a secularized form is now taught in universities.

The workshops that I attended began by circumambulating the temple and stupa. Upon entering the temple, we bowed, touched a hand to the floor, our heart centers, and our heads in a gesture of sincere and mindful respect. Seated on the floor, we chanted Sanskrit devotional verses proclaiming 169 names of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of Wisdom. Manjushri features prominently in the mythology of the origins of the Kathmandu Valley and is the subject of many songs, dances, and sadhanas. The story goes that the area was once submerged beneath a lotus lake and surrounded by a ring of mountains. When Manjushri came to the Kathmandu Valley

and perceived its potential for an ideal human settlement, he drew his flaming sword and cut and drained the waters, making it habitable for humans. Because of this, the culture and inhabitants of the valley abound with devotion for this bodhisattva.

The workshops focused on the practice of the deity Padmanateshvara (Lord Who Dances on a Lotus), a dancing form of Avalokiteshvara, the most widely revered of the deities of the Buddhist pantheon. Each morning, Prajwal would lead us in a prayer to Padmanateshvara, a danced request that the deity bless the transmission of this precious knowledge. We followed his graceful motions, enacting the use of the deity's symbolic implements and then repeatedly returned to the signature pose of one arm reaching toward transcendence while the other reaches toward the earth. We continued with

singing, discussion, and meditation. The meditation began with a tranquility practice for stable concentration, followed by a visualization of the deity. Afterward, we learned some basic charya dances for two or more hours.

The workshops concluded with an elaborate two-hour



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*On a wall in the library of the Portland temple hangs this enlarged black-and-white photo of Prajwal's father, Ratna Kaji Vajracharya, seated alongside a young female student whom he is teaching mudras for the charya dance of the noble goddess Tara. The young girl wears the embossed metal crown of the goddess as she replicates the gestures demonstrated by her guru. According to Prajwal, women have always practiced these dances privately at home, so females dancing charya is not a new development, although they did not serve as priests. Since the 1970s, public learning and the practice of charya dance for girls has moved in tandem with that for boys.*

other tantric initiates in private religious settings. In 1957, however, a charya dance was publicly performed at the World Buddhist Conference in Kathmandu. This bold act spurred several active Vajracharyas to finally take their cultural legacy public in order to secure its survival. Prajw-



At the Dance Mandal Temple, Prajwal presides over an *lhi* (pronounced “Ehee”) ceremony, an important part of Nepalese tradition in which young pre-adolescent girls—to insure fertility—make a commitment (a symbolic marriage) to the *Bel* fruit (wood apple), which has the quality of remaining fresh, healthy, and long-lasting.

ritual. We sat on the floor in two rows facing each other, with Prajwal at one end and the temple altar and main Buddha statue at the other. Prajwal wore the ritual attire of a Vajracharya priest—white robes overlaid with a royal blue cape and apron and an embossed silver five-lobed tantric crown on his head. He referred to the loose-leaf scripture pages draped over his crossed legs as he led us through a lengthy purification ritual of many offerings—rice, flower petals, colored powders, incense, etc.—that each of us had on individual brass plates. The central platter placed between our two rows displayed Padmanateshvara’s transformational tools (hand implements) of wisdom, skillful means, and compassion.

With mantra chanting, meditation, and visualization of Padmanateshvara, we invoked the dancing bodhisattva and progressed into a final two hours of dancing. Molding our bodies and hearts into expressions of compassion, stability, obstacle-clearing, and pure joy, we danced one de-

ity after another—from the compassionate, flowing, noble Tara to the highly energetic, trembling, stomping, wrathful Mahakala—until we could dance no more.

With the survival of such ritual traditions threatened by modernization and the difficulty in accessing master teachers, the opening up of virtual spaces is changing the means of transmitting cultural information and practices as well as who can gain access. The once-secret practice of Charya Nritya can be learned and cultivated from anywhere in the world. Our international Charya Nritya Zoom sessions always conclude with a prayer-dance dedication to maintain those profound wisdom traditions to benefit all beings. Our inspiring teacher offers encouragingly, “Without dancing and singing, there is no possibility of enlightenment.” With motivation, discipline, and the wonders of technology, I too can reach for the divine grace of one who dances on a lotus.

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