

Charya Nritya

Nepalese Ritual Dance of Deity Yoga

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At the beginning of an introductory dance class, my teacher tells the story of Buddhas enlightenment. When the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, sat meditating for years in extreme austerities and yet could not reach his aim of liberation, he finally nourished his emaciated body. Refreshed, mind cleared, he again sat, hands forming the *dhyana mudra* of the meditation posture. Still not fully confident in his enlightened nature, he sat firm. Then, spontaneously with a gesture from the heart, an inner *mudra*, he wholeheartedly moved a hand to touch the earth, acknowledging that it is necessary to be grounded in this body, and in this world, while the mind rests in transcendence. With the earth as his witness, he gained impenetrable confidence. In this way, moving from inner stillness into engaged gesture, the Buddha overcame all afflictions and suffering and fully realized his enlightenment.

What initially shifted my hands from *dhyana mudra*, the meditation gesture, into the *mudras* of sacred dance was a wish to integrate the spiritual and physical in my practice. The dance that changed my world is a Buddhist ritual dance from Nepal called Charya Nritya. Charya Nritya is part of the rich, Sanskrit-based Newar Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism that practices deity yoga, embodying our Buddha nature, through dancing the section of a *sadhana* that describes the attributes of a deity.

Following the Mahayana Buddhist goal of attaining Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings, the deities of both the Mahayana and Vajrayana pantheon are expressions of various facets of enlightenment, each exhibiting transcendent wisdom and universal compassion. These Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, or altruistic beings, subtly manifest throughout the universe to liberate sentient beings from suffering and guide them toward enlightenment. They manifest in many forms as skillful means to meet the varying needs of practitioners. A deity can be invoked by a practitioner through a meditation practice called a *sadhana*. A *sadhana* encompasses recitation, visualization, reflection, and mindful lifestyle, with practitioners devotedly connecting to a particular deity's qualities. Experientially, these divine presences are the spiritual aspect of our human realm—something other than our usual worldly ways—that draw us to reach beyond our limited views and behavior, realizing, even if for a moment, the deity within.

Charya Nritya includes the traditional elements of Newar Vajrayana ritual and reflects a *sadhanas* components: Sanskrit chanting, meditation, visualization, *mudras*.

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and movement, as well as ritual implements. These share the purpose of enacting one's highest aspirations and of discovering and imprinting the significance of the ritual in one's sensory body and mind through mindful attention. These ritual elements in Charya Nritya point to the divine nature in everyone, on the principle that all are worthy to be empowered with the indestructible confidence of a Buddha. The words of the chants and songs are terse descriptions of the deity being danced and embodied. The *mudras* follow the deep iconographic significance of a deity as well as expressing the deity's qualities described in the songs. These gestures are to be performed with wholeheartedness in body, mind, and outward expression.

The ritual implements of the dance are the ornaments and colors that are worn, which appear similar to the deity's, and connect us to a new physical paradigm within our own body. Heightened attention to perform the ritual is also an integral element, letting go of both concepts and desired results, and instead simply and mindfully performing the movements. The imprint of the ritual experience is then stronger and can be received more deeply and carried naturally into daily life.

The world of Tantra, of which Charya Nritya is a part, is a particularly elaborate path of devotion, faith, and individual exploration. It emphasizes using any tool toward enlightenment that can heighten and transmute one's practice, no matter how challenging and unspiritual that tool may appear, as long as the appropriate motivation and understanding are there. In this chapter I describe my own path and exploration, how I met the dance, and my own understanding of it.

Two Streams Converge: Ancient Tradition and Modern Practitioner

The Kathmandu Valley in Nepal lies at the crossroads of the ancient civilizations of Asia. Legend holds that the area was once covered by a lake. Nepal Mandala, as the Kathmandu Valley was known, was created by the divine intervention of the altruistic deity Maniushri. Using his flaming sword that cuts through ignorance, this lord of wisdom sliced a gorge that drained the lake and created a lush valley suitable for human habitation. The Newars are the earliest known and by all evidence the original inhabitants of the

As Manjushri's divine land, Nepal Mandala gave rise to a profoundly rich culture of spiritual wisdom and sacred arts. These arts serve as ritual offerings to the vast pantheon of Buddhist divinities and provide soteriological methods to awaken the deity within both artist and appreciator. Charya Nritya, one of the ritual arts that arose in this "Land of the Gods," is a dance to invoke, embody, and realize internally the deities in form and spirit.

It was a Newar painting of this origin story of Manjushri cutting the gorge that first sparked my interest in the Newar sacred arts. Although I had long taken a keen interest in Buddhist deities and iconography through years of intensive Tibetan and Zen practice, this portrayal of Manjushri was not a form I had ever seen. In images I had studied, Manjushri was sitting, his sword used internally to cut ignorance from the mind, his left hand holding a lotus with a scripture of wisdom.

My initial interest in Buddhism came through meditation in karate classes. At that time I was not attracted to, nor did I embrace, the sacred arts. With deepening interest

in following a Buddhist path, my mind strongly aspired to the ideal of renunciation on every level. “Leaving home” for me meant also leaving the body behind, including my karate practice, in pursuit of stillness and inner purity. I couldn’t make sense of the material world in relation to the spiritual realm, and so I immersed myself in Buddhist practices with an approach of mind over matter, imposing my will with fierce determination.

Although I renounced the body, and ritual along with it, ignoring their importance, I gradually recognized that something significant can be transmitted through a bodily gesture. While immersed in study in India, I was deeply affected by the handshake of a Tibetan *lama*, feeling more profoundly what was transmitted through the full engagement of energy of his hands than through his words of wisdom.

Around that time, a younger *lama*, still engaged in his monastic education, told me of his love for movement as he used his hands and body in the traditional debate form. Because he could move with intellectual and verbal expression, he found his mind more energetic and accessible and enjoyed the body and mind working fully together. His experience was that body, speech, and mind became united as one.

Eventually, after fifteen years of having the good fortune to dedicate myself to study and sitting practice in India with Tibetans and in Zen monasteries in the West, it became clear to me that I needed to move and express. I wanted to integrate all yogic arts into my Buddhist practice, feeling compelled by my love of *sadhana*, the deities, and the historical basis of that lushly artful spiritual world of ancient India and Nepal. I felt drawn to live my life as a *sadhana*, as a mindful ritual. I started learning Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance available to me in the Bay Area, and Iyengar yoga. I studied Indian raga singing and classical Sanskrit.

When I began dancing and singing after so many years of sitting, I first noticed a general mood-altering effect. I was impressed that I could walk into a class feeling resistant and tired and leave feeling buoyant, present, and joyful in the whole body, not just the mind. Grounded and uplifted, some balance in energy restored, I could learn about the challenges that my body and mind face in an environment of heightened joy!

It was my love for the Buddhist pantheon of innumerable deities that then brought me to the practice of Charya Nritya. My Indian dance teacher had spoken highly of this dance form and its principal teacher from Nepal, who was now living in the US. I sought him out and found in this ancient Newar ritual tradition all the yogic disciplines and branches of knowledge I was pursuing: dance, singing, Sanskrit songs, meditation, Buddhist deities, and iconography. Charya Nritya was for me a wish-fulfilling jewel. While exploring this dance, I saw the embodiment of the deities in the practice of my teacher, Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya. Having begun Charya dance in his early childhood and been taught within the household by his father, a scholar-priest, Prajwal was formed both in body and in mind by dancing the deities.

On first introduction to Prajwal, I closely studied his form and his movements, both in dancing and in daily life. When Prajwal speaks, his whole body speaks, the reverberation of a spoken syllable subtly rippling through his body, the expression of a fully engaged being. It was clear to me that it was a rare turn of remarkable good fortune to have such a skilled teacher of this unique sacred art form in the US. Prajwal is the only priest, dance master, and teacher of the lineage sharing his tradition in the West, for he realizes the value of this practice for serious practitioners everywhere, not only in Nepal.

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For the first few years, I traveled regularly to study the dance from the Bay Area to Portland, Oregon, where Prajwal and his foundation, Dance Mandal, are based. Eventually, to commit myself more fully and study more intensively, I moved to Portland. Dance became one of my main Buddhist practices in the form of Charya Nritya. Through it I studied both my mind and the movement of my body, gradually working to open the blockages and transform habits I experienced from life-long patterns. With a master as my role model, I watched two videos on two screens—one of Prajwal dancing and one of me performing the same dances simultaneously to the same recorded Charya song. I noted the differences and tried to model my movements after his. In contrast to Prajwal's continuous flow of movement, I recognized my tendency to relate to positions as separate goals, to quickly complete a movement and then wait for the next move, in stillness like a statue, without any feeling for the process and the time between postures. At times the rhythm of my feet lagged behind the rest of my speeding body. My movement quality was sometimes wildly erratic and unclear, and at other times tightly constricted by a habit to hold back.

The clear difference in our movement pointed to a difference in our minds. His dancing was not about reaching a position as if it was an intellectualized future goal, but rather about spaciously and joyfully experiencing the present through his active expression. He lived a fluid world of continuous subtle movement, precision, and inward focus. My mind's long-standing tendencies towards impatience, towards quick attainment so I could move on to the next thing, and of being pulled outside myself by the senses, became clearer with further understanding the energetic tendencies in my body, providing more focus for transformation. Deep inward attention and mental stillness had been part of my sitting practice, but the dance now provided a means to learn this quality of mind in movement.

This in turn sparked a deepening interest in the iconography and details of the deity images as I started to make connections between how these images, along with the movement and songs, relate to how our own bodies and minds work.

Dance and Deity Yoga

The images of divine forms give us clues about their minds—enlightened minds beyond anger, desire, and ignorance—through their display of perfect form, expression, gestures, implements, and ornaments. Just as my teacher was a role model for understanding my mind and seeing my potential, and biographies or stories of realized practitioners provide examples that inspire our practice, deities can serve as role models, worthy of true refuge. Their ethereal form, made up of the glow of their spiritual attainment, looks similar to my human form, which conveys that I can manifest such a presence as well. Each detail of a deity's image in sacred art displays a blessed reality of inner beauty, bringing to the world the spiritual teachings of the Buddha in visual form that we can relate to kinesthetically, rather than through conceptual language. In this way, images of deities convey a subtle energetic body that is a bridge between transcendence and earth, body and mind, form and formlessness. The deities are our own spiritual nature expressed in artistically graphic form.

Studying ourselves in movement, and in relation to these role models, we can see the ways we tightly restrict or discursively move our bodies at the psycho-physical ener-

getic level, as well as how we can enhance their potential. Practicing deity yoga through the dance affirms this body as a vessel, as a tool, and enhances its capabilities and capacity, going beyond assumed limitations—physical, emotional, and spiritual—in order to be of highest service. The deities’ natures appear either compassionately peaceful or wrathful, protective of practice and of truth, male or female, at times for healing, and all to aid others on their path to complete realization. These aspects of Buddha nature can be tapped into if their essence, iconography, and movement are studied and understood. No matter who you are, the deity can be revealed within you through your very own vessel.

It is common to experience the impact of color in daily life, and in deity dance practice it becomes clear how the color of a deity is significant. Wearing a green costume of the serene female deity Green Tara—green as the growth of nature toward full potential—feels quite different from donning the fiery red costume of a *dakini*, a semi-wrathful female of intuitive wisdom. When putting the colors on, those energies can begin to arise in me, whether Tara or the *dakini*. The movement for each dance also reflects these energetic differences: soft and all-embracing or sharp and definitive, both stemming from great wisdom and universal compassion.

In Charya, a dancer can begin to understand experientially in the body many points of Buddhist thought. The Six *Paramitas*, or Perfections, of generosity, wholesome conduct, patience, and so forth, manifest as divine ornaments in specific places of a deity’s form as seen in statues and *thangkas*, or religious scroll paintings. These ornaments are worn by the dancers and can be perceived not only mentally and visually as symbolizing the Six *Paramitas*, but also kinesthetically as recognizable, subtle accumulating energies in specific areas of our body for particular spiritual purposes.

The power of deep intention through the altruistic vow of *bodhicitta*, to be of benefit to all sentient beings, propels those who adhere to this vow to express it to the world around them. Coming from each purely balanced internal energy center, or *chakra*, it is then delivered by a corresponding *vayu*, the vital wind forces responsible for all levels of motion of the mind and body, both coarse and subtle. Each ornament a dancer wears, if worn with awareness, can then be experienced, with intentional movement, as the outward offering from one of these *chakras*, serviced by one of the five *vayus*.

As an example, the deity’s necklace at the heart center, the Dharma *chakra*, is the place of the first *paramita* of generosity. Through the *bodhisattva* vow, the psycho-physical energy from this heart of generosity is released and directed through the arms to give appropriately, only for the welfare of others, while being contained by



Sitting atop a lotus and a double vajra, the sign of indestructibility, Golden Tara Vasundhara (danced by Helen Fox Appell), Goddess of Abundance, gives infinite blessings. Observers surround her mandala in the sacred space of Nritya Mandala Temple in Portland, Oregon, September 2010. Photograph by Ishan Shakya, Dance Mandal.

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morality, the second *paramita*. The arms' subtle energy shimmers with the ornaments of perfection, the bracelets that manifest from the pulse of this virtue expressed to *the* world. The wholesome energy is directed through the center of the palm, an outpouring that is of full benefit through this focused engagement. In the process of the dance movement, through knowledge of such a deity's qualities, visualization, attention to the ornaments worn, *mudra*, and supportive breathing, the *chakras* and *vayus* become felt experiences. When the dancer, with the breath, brings mindfulness of the body to the ornament at the heart center, the heart naturally begins to open confidently to infinite giving.

Through these practices of dancing deity yoga a practitioner is aided in experiencing the potential to go beyond limited views and bodily imprints. Dancers can develop wisdom by seeing in their own form the contrast between the comportment of divine confidence and the difficulty of their particular human existence. Our humanness is both the foundation and the fuel for transformation, and therefore not to be hidden or judged, but discovered and understood, and digested patiently layer by layer. Only through disciplined and honest self-awareness can the deity within be realized.

The Dance Ritual

In the dressing room, a dancer mindfully puts on the necklace of the perfection of generosity, feeling the energy opening, while visualizing and reciting the mantra of the deity to be danced. Now and then a thought arises, almost spoken ... "this belt has never fit right, need a..." but the thought dissolves ... composure continues undisturbed. The mind returns to the physical connection, dissolving the emphasis on self and its preferences, and enjoying the upper necklace that encircles and contains the light energy at the throat center, the gift of appropriate speech and silence. This is the ultimate aspiration of the dance ritual: to make every movement of the body and mind and every sound with the consciousness and awareness of a deity, until you and the deity are one and the same.

Handling the crown with care, tying it at the back, the base at the hairline and its five points directed up, it draws one's energy upwards to the center. There, all phenomena, five elements, five wisdoms, and so forth, splay outward in each direction and return, merging as one unit, to the center. Feeling the uplift, head meeting crown, focusing inward, the dancer's energy becomes heightened.

From another room, the warm silence is broken. "This crown is so painful! Can I wear something else?" Suddenly other dancers have something to complain about, the dissatisfaction of human existence reverberates with full force. I am reminded of something I heard that Suzuki Roshi once said during a *Zen sesshin*: "You all look so enlightened ... and then you talk!" Back to ordinary reality and the world of comparison and dissatisfaction. The dance ritual accentuates those contrasts of divine pride and human insecurities. Going back and forth between our sense of ordinariness and the divine, becoming more familiar with, confident in, and empowered by our deepest nature, this is the practice of deity yoga embodied.

After the dancers are fully dressed, we sit meditating on a particular deity that will be danced. In the sacred space of a temple or center that has been prepared for ritual performance, the dance ritual begins. Surrounded by observers who partake in the *rasa*,

or essence of the ritual, the dancers set their motivation through the Refuge and *Bodhicitta* Prayer Dance. This is followed by making offerings in the Five Buddha Mandala formation through the dance of Sixteen Offering Goddesses. Dancers embody each of these Five Buddhas in a still meditation posture while the goddesses dance, offering gifts portrayed through *mudras*. These offerings, visualized and imagined, are to heighten the senses and are made with pure motivation, dropping judgments such as “not good enough” and “better than.” This prepares the dancer’s mind for the purity and elevated intention of the deity to soon be danced.

Following these preliminaries, the different deities from Charya Nrityas Buddhist pantheon can then arise. As the preliminary dancers spin off to the sides to observe, another dancer enters in full deity attire, dancing prescribed movements to a devotional song of a *bodhisattva* who works to benefit all. *Bodhisattvas* are active and the dancers embody this—a stark contrast to the straight, still shape and meditative lowered gaze of the Buddhas. Now, from this inner stillness, they are fully engaged in movement, in service, as seen in the *tribhanga*, a three-part side bend with the hips, torso, and neck, following a sliver moon curve of the spine. This form is characteristic of the statues and *thangkas* that portray these subtle bodies. In movement, and in the dance, *tribhanga* becomes a smooth undulation from side to side while the embodied deities display their altruistic activity. With this movement the dancers peer out gently, eyes no longer lowered but now in the universal gaze, open fully, not fixed on or attached to any one thing. With this gaze altruistic beings are open to everything that arises, and spontaneously move to offer nurturing protection whenever invoked. With kind faces, enchanting ornaments, and colored silks, these beings are breathtaking forms of conventional beauty. Their peaceful, serene movement nourishes us, giving us what is needed so that we can practice earnestly with our fears allayed. The dancer experiences this energy of the *bodhisattva* being danced, this fluidity of movement and grace, of openness and benevolent activity.

Then enters the fiery red *dakini*. Energy intensifies as the beautiful golden crown has turned to a headdress of skulls, an insight into the “bare bones” reality, no embellishments. This semi-wrathful wisdom female displays the power of fearlessness.—She prods practitioners with the “not so easy to accept” truth commanding them to go beyond conventional responses and needs into an experience of the simultaneity of dualities, of attraction and repulsion. When things are going well and we are getting comfortable in our practice aided by the *bodhisattva*, the universal *dakini* energy yanks at our attachments and exposes our aversions without compromise.

The boundaries between deity and dancer blur. The *dakini* dances with fervor, blissfully, the sharpness of her gestures conveys that sharp quality of her mind that can remain centered and clear in the most horrific of circumstances. The open stare of her eyes from an inward focus on emptiness creates a spacious intensity and depth to every precise move. The *dakini*’s heart intention is directed through the right hand of skillful means to an envisioned *vajra* chopper, her blade of discriminating wisdom, and with it she decisively swipes through all attachments as they arise. She raises her skull cup to drink and digest the life essence of the remains, generating the fuel to respond beyond limited conventions. Dancing and stomping on any negative force that takes us away from our deepest aspiration, the ankle bells of firm discipline ring out loudly, claiming her place in the world, demanding the observers’ attention, no complacency possible.

The *dakini* then disappears, the room quiets, and for the finale, suddenly with great

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ferocity, the *dharmapala*, or Dharma protector,' storms in. Dark, wrathful, and masked, the dancer shakes and stomps with precision, snake adornments dangling and spinning off from his body. The *dharmapala* appears in order to protect the practitioner from taking a worldly response to the harsh challenges of the *dakinis* wisdom. His movement and *mudras* are fiercely powerful, exact and yet wild, shaking the mind up from its superficial wish to take the old familiar road.

In the wake of his fury, from a quiet awe and openness that settles in the room, all dancers join to dance a dedication. Recognizing our humanness, our hands perform the *mudras* while chanting to purify any faults in the ritual or in embodying the deity. We seal in what we have learned—as well as the deities' energies and power-circulating it throughout our bodies and minds, and connect it to all, praying that the benefits of this ritual may reverberate out to every living being, none excluded.

Concluding Reflections

~ An observer recently commented after a performance, “When I stop judging or analyzing or thinking about what I’m seeing and what it means, I can tune in to a thread of movement expression. That is when I understand something beyond words and thought. That’s when the magic happens.”

Dance ritual is a universal language pointing towards non-conceptuality. As a Charya dancer, it is not thought that moves us in these wholesome ways but the strong, deep intention to be of benefit. This is a gate to the mind of enlightenment, the mind of a deity, which ultimately leads to spontaneous action.

Because of the profound significance, the rarity, and the beauty of Charya Nritya, Prajwal and Dance Mandal are invited to perform throughout the world, in museums, universities, Dharma centers, temples, churches, schools, and performing arts centers. To appropriately share this dance practice in its traditional sacred environment, we built a Newar Buddhist temple in Portland, the first and only one in the West. The temple serves as a space for Newar ritual of all kinds and particularly for the dance classes and offerings of Dance Mandal. Those who study there learn to appreciate the practice value of performance ritual, of the costumes, and of the consecrated surroundings.

Charya Nritya provides a Buddhist practice for those who have spent their lives as dancers, but most folks have little or no dance background. Many view themselves as having two left feet, or as incapable of memorizing step sequences. These limited views change as they practice and perform, shifting from a fixed idea of themselves to a feeling of empowerment.

One of the beauties of Charya Nritya is that a class brings together practitioners from many forms and sects of Buddhism, and from other traditions as well. Some students come to learn Charya Nritya not knowing anything about Buddhism, and therefore learn through dance.

People become interested in studying the dance for different reasons—for the sheer buoyancy and the expression of different dynamic energies within them, for enhancing deity yoga practice, or for understanding their bodies through movement. Often why they come changes as they dive deeper. ^

The meanings of this dance can touch on every aspect of the Buddhist tradition and, as a yogic practice, boundaries can dissolve and the truth of inseparability becomes

palpable. In general and over time, dancing the numerous deities of Charya Nritya directs the mind toward wholesome views, aligning both body and mind with Dharma, leaving positive imprints for this life and beyond. If all bodies are appropriate vessels to reveal the deity within, and all minds have enlightened Buddha essence, then anyone can dance the deities and meet the challenges of transformation through Charya dance.

NOTE

1. More on Charya Nritya can be found in a researched exploration by Buddhist scholar Miranda Shaw, author of *Passionate Enlightenment* and *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, in her forthcoming book on Charya Nritya, tentatively titled *Dancing Enlightenment*.