

# The Wisdom Buddhas as Performed Iconography

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Prajwal Vajracharya performs Vajrayogini, as a Charya Nritya dance deity yoga. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009. Photograph by Jonathan Greet. Courtesy of Core of Culture

ANY ATTEMPT to define “Himalayan art” looks to what characterises the word “Himalayan” in reference particularly to Himalayan cultures and societies that produced the art. This would include Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Lahul and Spiti, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. These are diverse cultures with distinct languages and customs, each with a robust ancient legacy of dance. These cultures can be called dancing cultures where dancing has been an integral aspect of each area of life—social, ritual and religious. In some, such as Kashmir, the role of dance is changing with the practise of religion. In others, such as Nepal, dance is connected to highest antiquity, used for the transformation of the Body-Mind, and widely depicted in art, as it has been for centuries.

The prevalence of Christianity in Western culture, particularly since the 3rd century when Thomas Aquinas declared theologically that the body and the soul were separate, resulted in the effective dichotomy of body and

spirit, the one being the location of sin, the other being essentially holy. This divided notion became established. In the mid-17th century, René Descartes (1596–1650), French philosopher and mathematician, separated the body from the mind in what is termed “substance dualism”, making the mind distinct from matter. These ideas became culturally dominant and remain influential today.

Christianity, through its increasing political power in the West, wiped out the ancient gnostic dance of the West connected to Greece and once popular in Rome. Ancient gnostic dance has continued in Asia, transmitted variously from masters, fathers and monastic lifestyles. The West has no equivalent in practice or general understanding of the “body as a vessel for spiritual cultivation”. A holistic notion of dance, fundamentally an integrated agent of mind and spirit, has not existed in the West for nearly 2000 years. It is important for researchers to perceive the profound difference in understanding and performing dance, between



Prajwal Vajracharya performs Vajrasattva as a deity yoga. Courtesy of Dance Mandal

Asian and Western cultures.

The concept of dance in the West is meagre compared to the glories of dance used as spiritual practice in Buddhism, Tantra and Sufism. Where Himalayan art is connected to spiritual practices and yoga, it is connected to dance. Where Himalayan art is connected to religion and deities, it is connected to dance. In those traditions where the ritual life is extinct, and all that remains are the material remnants, such as paintings, murals, buildings and ornaments, their appreciation arises in the context of an inert religion. Studying objects of religious art without the benefit of living ritual to provide the richness of meaning, and as a counter measure of antiquity, is a loss. Where ritual performance is extant, unbroken in transmission, or adapted to maintain relevance in personal practice, the student of Himalayan art has the richest of resources from which to derive meaning in the art. It is almost an imperative to make use of extant ritual performance to enhance our understanding of Himalayan art, Tantric Buddhist art in particular.

Tantric Buddhism is, and has been, practised in all of the cultures mentioned above. Today, Islam supersedes Buddhism in Kashmir. Shiva rites and Hindu religious expression have always co-existed with Buddhism in India and Nepal. Buddhism emerged as part of this climate. In Nepal, unlike other Vajrayana Buddhist areas, the transmitted practices of dance and yoga have always been in

Sanskrit, unbroken in family lineages since the 6th century. For Tibetan-based Vajrayana Buddhism, it was the Tibetan translations that saved the Indian scriptures from obscurity. The Sanskrit ritual transmission is an indicator of the antiquity of the dance and Buddhism that is practised in Nepal by the Vajracharya priests.

An exploration into Himalayan art is served by understanding the cultures of the Himalayas as dancing cultures since ancient times. Extant ritual practices can provide insight into the art of these places. Dance is an identifier among Himalayan people, who would recognise quickly where someone was from by their dancing. Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, is a characteristic religion of the Trans-Himalaya, and Vajrayana Buddhism sustains many extant psycho-physical movement traditions of dance, meditation and yoga. These are essential components of religious expression, at least as old, and usually older, than artistic expression.

In Himalayan cultures, ritual dance is well known, as foreign as it might be to Western or other modernised countries. Dances, so old their origins are shrouded in myth and ancestry, are still performed, and are part of normal life.

A student of Himalayan art can see that the Himalayan cultures dance, their religion dances, their rituals dance, their paintings are full of dancing. Sculpture depicts dancing. Dance is in every dimension of consciousness in Himalayan Tantric Buddhist cultures. Everyone dances, young and old. Villagers dance, courts danced in earlier times. Men and women dance.

Regarding the pantheon of the deities, most of which have functional roles in Tantric meditation visualisation practices, there are many characters who not only dance, but always dance. Among the commonly depicted subjects of Vajrayana Buddhist art, that are always shown dancing, are female spiritual energies called in Sanskrit, *Dakinis*, and sky-heroes called in Tibetan, *Ging*, who join Black Hat sorcerers, stags, skeletons and wrathful deities. Converted pre-Buddhist deities dance on as *Dharmapala*, protectors of Buddhism, bound in service by the cohesive power of danced order. As religious art goes, no religion depicts as much dancing as Buddhism. It is everywhere in the cultures and in the art. It is a core religious expression, being energised life itself. Dance fundamentally embodies the transmission of teachings. Dance is a stream of transmission in Buddhism that has been highly successful in surviving.

Three terms help explain dance in Tantric Buddhism: dance actual, dance depicted and dance ephemeral. These refer, respectively, to real physical dancing; to images of dance in artistic expression; and, finally, to dance in meditation visualisations. These three aspects of dance, reflecting an active consciousness in multiple dimensions, overlap, and are simultaneous and interconnected.

One of the most fundamental systems of iconographic images in Vajrayana Buddhism is that of the five Wisdom Buddhas. They are otherwise known as the Tathagata Buddhas, the Dhyani Buddhas and the Panchen Buddhas. The five Buddhas are aspects of Buddhahood, not distinct deities. They uphold the scaffolding of the heavens and define personal transformation towards the Buddha Nature. They are Cosmic Buddhas. The Wisdom Buddhas are the basis of an elaborate iconographic schema, that begins with each Buddha and continues on to embrace the entire universe,

## Palace Museum Tathagata Buddhas

The Wisdom Buddhas as works of art. This exquisite set of Tathagata Buddhas dates to the 10th century, and come from north-eastern India, where Vajrayana Buddhism was practised. This set belongs to the collection in the Palace Museum, Beijing. Their origins and ritual use are shrouded in history. They are admired for their fine artistry, which depicts the importance of the concept of the five Wisdom Buddhas. Their clarity and beauty shine as material objects, demonstrating the degree of quality given to the material expression of the iconographic set. They are examples of the Wisdom Buddhas admired as works of art. The five characteristic mudra associated with each of the five Wisdom Buddhas are clear.



Vairocana, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas. North-eastern India. Brass with silver, copper inlay and turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl inlay and pigment. 10th century. Height 21.5 cm. Courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing



Akshobhya, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas. North-eastern India. Brass with silver, copper inlay and turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl inlay and pigment. 10th century. Height 21.5 cm. Courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing



Ratnasambhava, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas. North-eastern India. Brass with silver, copper inlay and turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl inlay and pigment. 10th century. Height 21.5 cm. Courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing

as described by five elements and pervasive Dharma across vast aeons of time, Buddhas before Shakyamuni and Buddhas to come.

The five Buddhas are Vairocana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha and Amogasiddhi. With Vairocana usually above at centre, the other four Buddhas demark each of the four cardinal directions. Taken together, they describe dome-shaped heavens. In fact, the five Wisdom Buddhas define the structure of Boudanath Stupa in Kathmandu, one of the largest and oldest mandala-stupa complexes in the world, dating back to the 5th or the 6th century. Kathmandu's famous Swayambunath Stupa complex also is designed according to the five Tathagatha Buddha scheme, with shrines to each of the five Buddhas appearing in sequence as one circumambulates clockwise around the stupa. Circumambulation is one of the oldest forms of ritual



Amitabha, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas. North-eastern India. Brass with silver, copper inlay and turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl inlay and pigment. 10th century. Height 21.5 cm. Courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing



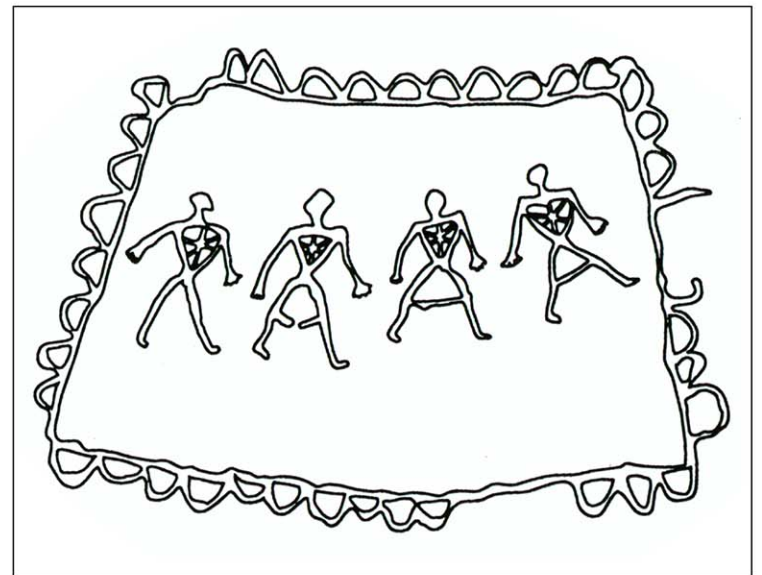
Amoghasiddhi, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas. North-eastern India. Brass with silver, copper inlay and turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl inlay and pigment. 10th century. Height 21.5 cm. Courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing

movement, here associated with archaic stupa forms and the Wisdom Buddhas.

These five Buddhas have been depicted in art in many ways, within many cultures, using various media. They attained a high level of beauty and skill as material objects in sculptures borrowed from the Palace Museum in Beijing for an exhibition, “The Light of Buddha: Buddhist Sculptures of the Palace Museum and Zhiguan Museum of Fine Art”, at the Palace Museum. Their importance is clear from the level of the artistry alone.

Such a refined material distillation of the five Wisdom Buddhas still reflects their extant ritual performance in Himalayan cultures—the vitality that has transmitted their meaning. Since preliterate times, dance as an image functioned as language, as evidenced in a petroglyph from North India. The figures are positioned within a closed field (a cosmogram or mandala) and positioned to give meaning. Human movement has always been known to be able to take on meaning. In terms of artistic expression, dance has priority in time as an elemental and universal communicator, as a sign of antiquity, and as a symbolic way to learn human nature.

The Newar Vajracharya tradition of Tantric Buddhism performs the five Panchen Buddhas variously in Charya Nritya dance: as a group of nine dancers including the five Buddhas and their four consort Taras; as a group of five dancers embodying each of the five Buddhas; and as a personal deity yoga of transformation. Charya Nritya means “dance as a spiritual practice”. The Vajracharya priests are a hereditary lineage. Their priesthood and lineages of Sadhanas, dances, mantras and rites, date to early mediaeval



Petroglyph, North India, circa 30,000–20,000 BC. From *The History of Cartography, Vol. 1*, edited by J.B. Harley and David Woodward, University of Chicago Press, 1987. Courtesy of Newberry Library

times, in about the 6th century. Their priestly tradition, however, dates the dances as a Buddhist practice to more than 2000 years old.

The rise of the Vajracharya caste, intended exclusively to maintain the Newar Tantric Buddhist practices through family lineages, coincides with the early prevalence of Tantric Mahasiddhas, who were yogic masters of a heterodox character. The five Dhyani Buddhas are among the



Charya Nritya *sadhana*, Panchen Buddha, ritual of the five Wisdom Buddhas. Achheswor Mahavihara, Patan. Courtesy of Dance Mandal



Tantric priest's crown for Cakrasambara Charya Nritya dance. Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, late 18th century, gilt-copper and copper with pigments. Collection of Barbara and David Kipper. © Art Institute of Chicago. Creative Commons licence

oldest rites of the Vajracharya priesthood, a representative consciousness-raising practical Buddhism continuing in secret transmission for more than 700 years. As such, it is a living relic of a much earlier Buddhism. Now, with the international work of Prajwal Vajracharya, the responsibility for transmitting the ancient Newar Tantric practices goes beyond the family lineage, and into public knowledge, international spiritual practice, academic scholarship and cultural appreciation. It is truly a new day for the continuing transmission of the five Dhyani Buddhas of Newar Buddhism and the Charya Nritya dances that embody them.

In a related, but culturally distinct, way, Tibetan Buddhist monks of the Vajrayana tradition have a number of monastic rituals enacting and embodying the five Tathagata Buddhas, such as the Vajradhatu ritual practised at Tabo monastery in Spiti, and the Kunrig ritual practised at Matho monastery in Ladakh and other Sakya monasteries. The two distinct traditions—priestly Newar Vajracharya and monastic Tibetan Vajrayana—keep alive ancient rituals of the five Wisdom Buddhas that rely on visualisation meditation for the cultivation and transformation of mind. It is practical, not intellectual, Buddhism.

Both traditions make use of mudra, or ritual hand gestures. Mudra are an extremely old manner of danced symbolic sign language. Mudra are a dance of the hands, designed to awaken consciousness throughout the mind and body. In action, it is not only the hand position that matters, but also the usage of the hand, and the complex meaning of mudra flowing one into another while a mantra is chanted. Mudra and mantra are intertwined. The mudra flow one into another as surely as everything changes in the illusory world.

Himalayan art has endless depictions of mudra. No doubt, mudra were invented before their depiction, and were given original life by Vedic dancers and meditation adepts. Only centuries later were mudra adopted and

adapted by *tantrikas*, priests and monks to become instrumental components of tantric ritual efficacy: agents of consciousness awakening. In this, mudra connects to Mahamudra—spontaneous complete awakening. The Vajrayana Buddhist use of mudra marks an evolution with the concept of Mahamudra. As a rule, movement and dance depicted in Buddhist art is based on real dancing and ritual practice.

One of many astonishing things gleaned from the Dunhuang Cave Grottoes (4th–9th centuries), in effect a “Rosetta Stone” of ancient dances, is that the dances are real. Painstaking research by the Dunhuang Academy concluded that the instruments, fabrics, weapons, architectural styles, and even landscapes, depicted over centuries, were based on real examples. The dances, too, in these hundreds of painted and sculpted caves are real, even as they became more stylised over time.

However refined a Buddhist artwork might be, the artist did not conceive of the movement or the mudra, which existed beforehand. The superabundance of dance imagery in Tantric Buddhist art, as with the murals in the Dunhuang caves, reflects an actual robust dance culture. The mudra and movement were existing ways of transmitting form and meaning across borders, languages and customs. Painters and sculptors continued the movement of mudra across the landscape of Buddhism, as concretised records and cues. Mudra are meant to be understood. Mudra provided a baseline of authenticity and coherence between Buddhist teachings, ritual practice and artistic depiction; indeed, a coherence among all art in the culture-crossing Buddhist world.

The relationship between artistic depiction and performed iconography is one of still art and moving art. In the Newar Charya tradition, these two aspects of expression—art and dance—are related in a tradition-stabilising way. Within the moving dance, and constantly changing mudra, the

## Tabo Tathagata Buddhas

The Wisdom Buddhas as performative iconography. This set of Tathagata Buddhas from Tabo monastery in north-eastern India are unique as sculptural reliefs within an 11th century assembly hall where monks have continuously performed rituals, and today perform the Vajradhatu ritual of the five Cosmic Buddhas. They appear to float in the sky to denote their cosmic quality. More than that, they hover above the meditating monks, within a vast architectural mandala for which they provide the basic structure.

As the monks meditate and visualise the mandala deities, the sculptural and painted deities facilitate the monk's visualisation. That is their purpose. The icons of the five Buddhas are performative, meant to be performed, as points of meditative action on a mandala that serves as a ritual map. There has been unbroken practise of tantric Buddhist ritual in this assembly hall for more than 1000 years. The artworks are designed to assist the meditating monks by guiding the performance of mudra, and further, delineating the form, ornaments and attributes of the deities, as they proceed through the course of the ritual.

This, then, produces an experience of *sunyata*, or emptiness. The deities' location on the walls, above the monks' heads, around all sides of the mandala, and in the assembly hall's central chamber, further underscores the performative nature of the architectural mandala. What is intended is an integration of the living ritual transmission, and movement forms such as mudra, with the art.

The beauty, antiquity and rare style of these Buddhas are without question. They can be appreciated as the works of art that they surely are. However, their original purpose as performative iconography is still intact. Their ritual use explains their artistic placement in situ, and shows the depth of meaning and function in Buddhist religious art of the 10th century and beyond.



Akshobhya, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, blue in colour. Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Tabo Assembly Hall, circa 1040, painted clay image on wooden armature. Photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984. Notice the hand lowered and to the side of the body. This is a variant of the mudra associated with this deity, but nevertheless shows Buddha touching the ground.



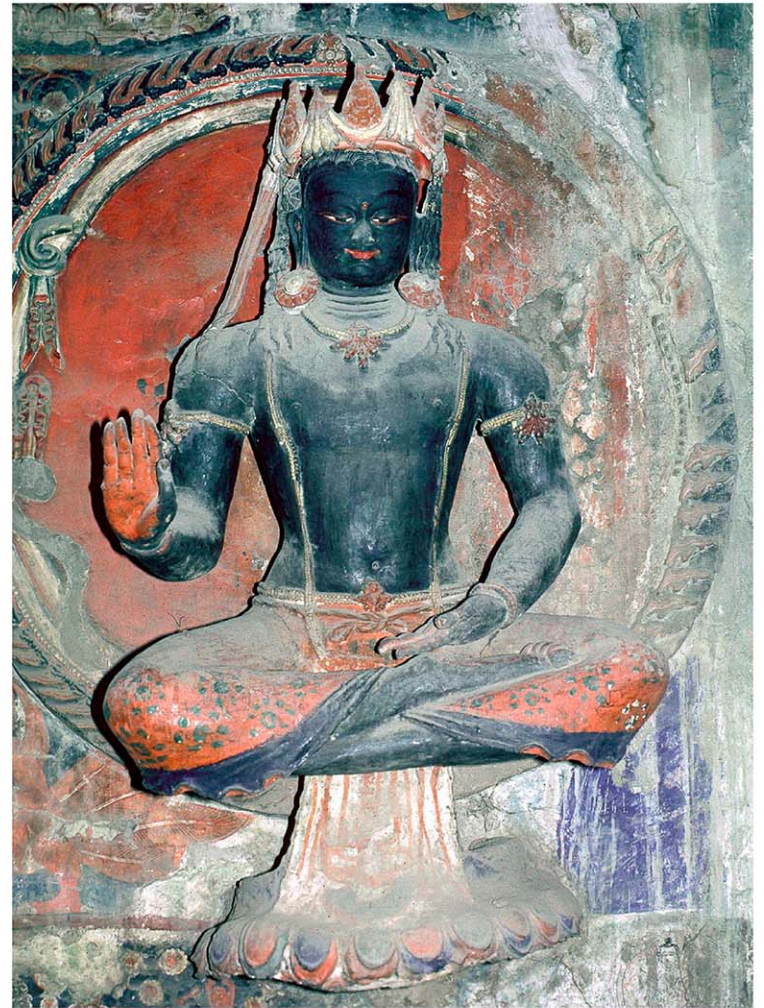
Vairocana, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, white in colour. Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Tabo Assembly Hall, circa 1040, painted clay image on wooden armature. Photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984. Notice the exceptionally modelled image, bodies facing four directions to depict one deity's central and cosmic power.



Ratnasambhava, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, yellow in colour. Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Tabo Assembly Hall, circa 1040, painted clay image on wooden armature. Photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984. Notice the hand lowered and to the side of the body. This is a variant of the mudra associated with this deity, but nevertheless shows Buddha with palm facing outward in an act of giving.



Amitabha, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, red in colour. Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Tabo Assembly Hall, circa 1040, painted clay image on wooden armature. Photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984



Amoghasiddhi, one of the five Wisdom Buddhas, green in colour. Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Tabo Assembly Hall, circa 1040, painted clay image on wooden armature. Photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984

dancer must at points take a pose exactly like the standard artistic depiction, itself based on actual dance: the body is held in three-part *tribhanga* position bent at the knees, hips and head forming a gentle S-curve. The mudra must be precisely the same, as are the clothing, the jewellery and ornaments. In this way, the art and the dance mutually reinforce the fundamental expression of basic teachings. The art then comes to define points in the dance, guideposts to the choreography, which informs and sustains the artistic iconography. The art is, in fact, a kind of dance notation.

Shri Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya is a thirty-fifth generation Newar Buddhist priest. His father, a great scholar of Sanskrit and dance, instructed Prajwal to make public the esoteric Charya Nritya ritual dances that had been secretly maintained by the Vajracharya priests for more than 700 years. Prajwal, who lives in a Newar Vihara built for him in Portland, Oregon, has dedicated his life to sustaining and transmitting his ancient lineage practices, including deity yoga as dance. In Newar Buddhism, Prajwal explains, one cannot attain enlightenment without singing and dancing, which is to say, without chanting mantra and meditating. Singing becomes chanted Sanskrit mantra. Dancing and meditation are the same thing. Dancing means meditation. The dancing deities in *thangka* paintings are meditations in themselves. Every depiction of a dancing deity, being ultimately based on an actual dancer, is an image of

meditation.

Prajwal teaches that Vajrayana dances originated in the 6th or 7th centuries along with other Vajrayana ritual forms. Anthropologist Robert Levy and the late art historian, Mary Slusser, have come to similar understandings, adding that this seminal period led to a flowering of ritual forms 200 to 300 years later, a timetable that would include monastic Cham dance.

Prajwal explains that dances were once widely practised among Mahayana Buddhists in syncretic association with tantra, and today remain extant only in Nepal, long a centre of enlightened Buddhist masters and Tantric Mahasiddhas, or adepts with high yogic powers, who travelled there from all parts of India and the Himalayas. In the 7th century, before travelling to Tibet to establish Buddhism there, Padmasambhava studied in Kathmandu with Vajra Humkara, for example. This story too attests to the antiquity of Buddhist practice in Nepal.

Tibetan King Trisong Detsen (742–797) had two wives, one of whom was Nepalese. She brought Newar Buddhism and masters with her. It is reasonable to consider that some part of what is popularly called “Tibetan Buddhism” had origins in Nepal, where adepts travelled to gain ancient empowerments connected to a culture of esoteric Mahasiddha practices.

The Newar dance is basically a religious exercise designed to develop the adept’s spirituality and mental con-



Prajwal Vajracharya performs Vajrapani, as a Charya Nriya dance deity yoga. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009. Photograph by Jonathan Greet. Courtesy of Core of Culture



Prajwal Vajracharya and Helen Appell perform Charya Nriya dance, Cakrasamvara and consort Vajravarahi



Crown headpiece for Charya Nriya dancer. Here, the five Wisdom Buddhas appear in embrace with their consorts. 19th century. Tooled leather, paint and fabric. Courtesy of Dance Mandal

trol, as well as to teach the great truths of Buddhism. The Newar Charya dances of the five Wisdom Buddhas precede monastic Cham dance by several hundred years. The monastic Vajradhatu ritual, also a performed mandala of the five Wisdom Buddhas, continues an even older tradition within Buddhism of performing the iconography of the five Buddhas. First Charya, then Cham.

The Vajracharya caste of the Newar ethnic group are Tantric Buddhist priests responsible for the performance of Vajrayana rituals. A ritual dance, Charya Nriya, is part of this transmitted responsibility. The dance is part of basic yoga meditation, known as *sadhana*, which is an evocation of deities that leads the worshipper directly to the main goal of Vajrayana Buddhism: the realisation of emptiness, *sunyata*, and the identity of the worshipper with it. The Vajracharyas teach that this transformative danced *sadhana* is more than 2000 years old, connected to the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. There is nothing in Charya dance that precludes it from being so old. The movements and mudra are at least that old. Mantra and songs are newer. As Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), the Italian explorer, noticed, dance is a marker of antiquity. Dance can spread and continue where language cannot. It can hold various meanings. Mudra, as a body-based symbolic language ontologically preceding spoken language, was at the vanguard of Buddhist propagation into different cultures.

The aim of this dance-inclusive *sadhana* is to transcend duality by attaining a vivid conscious experience of the non-dual state. The peaceful and wrathful deities invoked during the *sadhana* correspond to the adept's own being. The deities are the forms the adept assumes in certain states of consciousness, such as the state after death, certain visionary dream states, and states reached during meditation.

The dancing priest sees the universe as a spotless expanse of a mandala, a purity, a manifested realm of the deities. The very nature of the deities is recognised as pure void. Their immense power is the infinite creative potential of void, manifested in its non-dual emanation. Emptiness and resultant bliss are the antidote to suffering and the primary action of Buddhist teaching. Step by step, methodically awakening his form and being, the dancer divinises his body.

Charya Nitya dance begins by establishing the non-dual character of the exercise. It is carried out as an embodiment of emptiness, from which personal transformation is not only possible, but prescribed in an orderly manifestation as a danced iconography: the deity embodied, joined to the insubstantiality of the adept, a recognition of one's true nature. In this way, it is a transformation of intellectual concepts into experiential consciousness.

Among the extant Charya Nriya dance traditions is a performance of the five Wisdom Buddhas. A shared philosophy connects performance and art. One distinction of the performance attitude is that qualities of deities, for example, are actionable, not merely intellectual or artistic attributes. It is within this personal transformation of being, of body and mind, that the real teachings of Buddha regarding emptiness and compassion are embodied, and come to life.

Prajwal teaches dancers the *sadhana* of the Dhyani Buddhas, using the mudra to map the body, sequentially transforming each part of the body, making it a vessel of emptiness as the dancer becomes the virtues of the deity,



Prajwal Vajracharya with students performing Panchen Buddha, the *sadhana* of the five Wisdom Buddhas, within a mandala. Nritya Mandala Mahavihara, Portland, Oregon. Courtesy of Dance Mandal



incarnate. Each of the five Buddhas has a primary virtue: sovereignty, steadfastness, compassion, light and dauntlessness. Each crown awakens a different mental composure. Each piece of jewellery, from wrists to ankles, neck and fingers, awakens the body as ornaments of virtue, until from head to toe, the dancer has become the dance of embodied virtues, a living example of emptiness and bliss. The cohesive nature of the dancer-meditator, completely transforming the entire body, produces action in the world that is good conduct, the Bodhisattva's way.

The five Dhyani mudra rehearse the story of the Buddha and sequentially transform the dancer. Lord Buddha confirms his enlightenment and touches the ground (*bhumispara mudra*). Placing his arm down, palm outward (*varada mudra*), in a gesture of giving, the Buddha sees the suffering of the world, and wants to give his teaching. The Buddha makes the symbol of the Dharma Wheel (*dharmachakra mudra*) to teach the essence of Buddhism. This brings meditation, as hands are laid together in his lap (*dyana mudra*). With endless compassion, the Buddha wants to give his protection, as he raises one arm to place the palm facing outward, the other hand in his lap (*abhaya mudra*). These five dance mudra are the characteristic mudra for each of the five Wisdom Buddhas. Akshobya, Buddha of Unshakability in the *bhumispara mudra*; Ratnasambhava, the Buddha of Generosity in the *varada mudra*; Vairocana, the Totality of Existence, in the *dharmachakra mudra*; Amitabha, the Meditation Buddha, in the *dyana mudra*; and Amoghasiddhi, Buddha of Protection, in the *abhaya mudra*.

Charya dance is taught by imbuing the dancer with symbolic agents of transformation into becoming the deity, by embodying the virtues of the deity, moving in the joy of actually embodying the deity as incarnate virtue. This state of mind is reinforced with the chanted mantra, the steps of the choreography and always ongoing mudra. In this, five dancers, or one dancer, can embody the five Dhayni Buddhas, and be transformed by dance as a spiritual practice. More than a dance, Charya is a Tantric Buddhist deity yoga of complete Body-Mind transformation into the deity.

Beginning in *sunyata*, emptiness, and ending in embodied divine bliss, the complete teachings of Buddhism are present in this dance. For Newar Buddhists, this is the fundamental practice of what it means to be Buddhist: to effect this complete personal transformation.

By comparison, the Tibetan monastic tradition sustains a Vajradhatu ritual at Tabo monastery, centred on the Wisdom Buddhas, that is perhaps 1000 years old, or about the same age as the Vajradhatu Assembly Hall there, if transmission has been sustained over the centuries. It could also be much older... or much newer. This is currently the subject of a documentation and research project, focused on the act of transmission. At Tabo, the main assembly hall, that dates to 996, is a three-dimensional Vajradhatu mandala of the five Tathagata Buddhas and other assembled deities of the mandala. For the communal ritual, the assembled monks sit within this mandala-hall, chanting and performing mudra, surrounded by murals and large sculptural reliefs of the deities.

One purpose of these depicted deities is to facilitate meditation visualisations being undertaken by the monks performing the ritual. This imparts a performative intent to the sculptural iconography—that it is meant to be animated by monks as meditation visualisations in a mandala of shimmering emptiness. It is interesting to note that in the Tabo reliefs, that date to 1042, two Wisdom Buddha mudra are performed slightly differently than in Charya, and also other more common depictions of the deities. In the Tabo deities, the arm is placed down and to the side of the leg, rather than the arm being extended down in front of the leg in the *bhumispara mudra* and the *varada mudra*.

Further research into the mudra and other ritual practices of this monastic performance of the Wisdom Buddhas is planned, along with a deeper exposition of the deity yoga that is Newar Charya Nritya dance. Himalayan art and ritual are of the same source, and with the same intent. Understanding more about how danced and performed iconography assimilates the art is a rich field of exploration, perhaps offering insights into the nature of Himalayan art.