

The article below is the second of two research papers on the ancient monastic dance tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The first was accepted by the Society of Dance History Scholars, to be delivered by the author as their representative at the Fifth International Dance Conference, in Hong Kong, 1990. During a six-month period, during that year, Nanci lived in Dharamsala and meet several times with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to discuss her research, among other topics. The second research paper, below, was developed and written in Dharamsala, at the request of the Tibetan government-in-exile, for publication in their volume-sized "Year of Tibet" issue of Cho Yang Magazine: The Voice of Tibetan Religion and Culture, 1991. Nanci is also author with photographer Bill Warren of Living Tibet: The Dalai Lama in Dharamsala (Snow Lion Publications; 1995; foreword by the Dalai Lama).

## **Interviews with a Dance Master from Tibet: Movement Visualization as Tantric Practice**

**by Nanci Rose-Ritter**

*"On the outside, the dances are for the health of the physical body, but in terms of the mind, the purpose is more profound."*

~ Ven. Ngawang Chonjor

"There is no place that is without the Buddha; there is no place where Buddha is not. That being the case, when offerings are made, and given one's own mental attitude – the degree of faith and aspiration – sacred dances have a dual aspiration and purpose." Thus began the first in a series of four interviews with Ven. Ngawang Chonjor regarding sacred ritual dance, as practiced for centuries by Namgyal Monastery monks in Tibet, and now continued by the same monastery in India.

The semi-retired dance master at the relocated Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, India, had served as a principal dancer and dance master in Tibet for many years. Ngawang Chonjor graciously agreed to the interviews based on his concerns for survival of the sacred dance heritage. These sessions, held at the monastery in India, were kindly translated from Tibetan into English, by Philippe Goldin [currently Director of Stanford University's Clinically Applied Affective Neuroscience Research Group]. Said Ven. Ngawang Chonjor, "The people who watch monastic dances may benefit through enjoyment, but those who actually do the dances are making offerings to all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and others present before them."

More specifically, the Tibetan sacred dance tradition (as opposed to Tibetan folk and operatic dance forms) is a rich facet of tantric transformative practice, albeit ancillary to other more prominent functions within the overall ritual pattern. It is a branch of the larger ritual, rather than the ritual itself. It is based on a method which requires the practitioner to make physical the movements visualized – primarily of oneself as specific deities in motion – both prior to, and during the dance itself. Mentally difficult, this form of devotion may appear deceptively rough-edged, especially from a Western perspective, or compared with classical Indian and other Eastern dance forms. A unique concentration, spiritual symbolism and inner orientation is involved in Tibetan spiritual dance; special skill of body and mind allows for few accomplished dancer-monks in any generation.

Monasteries in Tibet had their own particular style and repertoire of dances associated with universally observed ceremonies. Often a trademark of an institution was its dance history and current level of practice. Unfortunately, due to the priorities of life in exile, dances are now less frequently taught and practiced. Many monastic institutions have been unable, at this juncture, to continue this strictly proscribed form of sacred tantric activity.

Every dance has its time and place. The centuries-old choreographed piece is regularly “performed” as an essential aspect of certain Buddhist celebrations or rites yet ritual dance is, by no means, a component of all spiritual events. Historically, sacred dance in Tibet began with pre-Buddhist Bon and was refined by Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who passed his own visions of deities-in-movement to his students and thus to the early Tibetan Nyingma lineage. Later, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, known for his profound visionary experiences and interest in the arts, codified numerous classic dances, most notably the Heruka and Vajrasattva [deities] Cham, into his Cham Yig (Text of Fierce Deity Dances), contained within his collected works.

The Great Fifth Dalai Lama’s inclusion of dance into philosophic tantric literature is the key reason for Tibet’s religious dance heritage surviving as a universally practiced component of monastic life in each of the lineages. Nuns, unfortunately, have been excluded, obviously due to ongoing patriarchal Tibetan issues. Said one nun, “It’s not that we’re forbidden to learn the dances; it’s just no one teaches them to us.”

Certain monasteries in exile (in keeping with practices previously maintained within Tibet), such as the Kargyu lineage’s Pal Phuntsok Choekhor Ling Khampagar Monastery at Tashi Jong, in Himachal Pradesh, India, have maintained an especially strong sacred dance tradition, while others have no dance curriculum at all. Namgyal Monastery, in Dharamsala, India, the predominantly Gelugpa institution whose monks serve as ritual attendants for the religious functions of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, falls midway between the two extremes. Similar to paintings of deities conforming to the original inspired vision, each dance is taught following the style of its particular monastery, without alteration from year to year. An accomplished dance master is responsible for selecting and training monks, and leading the dance as it is practiced/performed according to the initial vision of its creation.

Commonly called Lama Dance by Westerners and non-monastics, or Gar Cham by untrained monks, sacred dance is often regarded as a mysterious tantric practice, the source of wide misunderstanding, even within the Tibetan community itself. Correctly speaking, either the term Gar or Cham is to be used separately, depending upon the specific dance under discussion. Dances of a calm, peaceful nature are known as Gar. Conversely, dances of a forceful or “wrathful” nature, executed with emphasis on vigorous footwork, are called Cham. The Kalachakra dance, executed by non-costumed monks during a juncture in the Kalachakra empowerment given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is known as Kalachakra Gar; its manner is soothing and consists of a complex pattern of topic-specific mudras (symbolic movements of the hands). Were the dance to consist, rather, of energetic masked monks depicted as fierce deities, it would be called Cham as opposed to Gar.

As a highly “secret transmission” granted within the esoteric tantric tradition, both Gar and Cham are associated with the quality identified as “increasing.” Ven. Ngawang Chonjor, who served as Kalachakra Dance Master (Gar Pon) at Namgyal Monastery, India, for 18 years, identified the four types of tantric activity as: 1) pacifying; 2) forceful; 3) influence (of others due to your activity); 4) increase. “Monastic dance has to do with ‘increase,’ or the wisdom and merit developed in one’s lifespan,” he said.

”Pacifying (or peaceful) has to do with harmonious actions, gentle activities. Forceful (or wrathful) activity, is when the personal mind is motivated by the altruistic mind of enlightenment; simultaneously, the outer manifestation is fearsome in order to have forceful energy for overcoming negativities and harmful influences.” Continued the Venerable, “The activity of influence (or power) refers to what is called empowerments or initiations, the ritual tradition passed down from teacher to student in order to introduce the student, through the mind of the teacher, into a particular practice and its contents. There are many divisions within the category of increase; the dances are one division.”

Ven. Ngawang Chonjor was born in 1934 in Chamdo, eastern Tibet. His father was from Amdo, his mother from Lhasa. His maternal grandfather worked for the Tibetan government and was sent to a check-post in Chamdo where he brought his wife and daughter to live. This daughter grew up to become Ngawang Chonjor’s mother. He said, “The place where I was born is the area of the Tibetan-Chinese border and was actually where the Chinese started encroaching and taking land prior to 1959. They were on one side of the bridge and Tibetans were on the other. People were allowed to go back and forth but in order to do that from the Tibetan side, you had to provide signed proof of your father’s identity. Then you would be given a pass to cross the bridge. Going back from the Chinese side, Tibetans were issued documents and allowed to return.”

He recalled, “I was 11 years old when I arrive in Lhasa. From that age onward, I didn’t see my father again because my parents separated so we four children and my mother could live near her parents in Lhasa. When the communist Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959, I worried about my father.” The young Ngawang Chonjor had an uncle at Namgyal Monastery, Tibet, so he made a request to enroll there. At age 13, he was accepted at Sera Jey College, “where I studied Tibetan language until age 17.” He was then accepted at Namgyal Monastery, “at which time I began studying Buddhist scriptures required in order to become a Namgyal monk.”

Immediately after being ordained, Ngawang Chonjor began his studies in ritual dance. The first piece taught to his group of fellow novices was Sha-Nak (Black Hat Dance). Noted for its wide-sleeved robes and ornate three-foot headpieces with wide brims, this dance serves a variety of purposes, depending on the context in which it is shown. Within the Mahakala festival held annually at Tashi Jong, for example, the Sha-Nak is performed by 21 monks as a day-long preparatory dance to ‘clear the ground,’ meaning “dispelling obstacles and bringing auspiciousness” to the two weeks of ritual activity to follow. The flowing Sha-Nak costume is associated with both the traditional dress of tantric practitioners, and with the monk Lhalung Pal Dor, who in the ninth century, heroically killed the vicious anti-Buddhist ruler Lang Dharma, by concealing a bow and arrow in his wide sleeve. The swirling of 21 long, flowing costumes with extended wide sleeves creates a mesmerizing effect on the viewer and is a challenge for the dancer, especially in sweltering heat with a cumbersome, heavy headdress.

Once the Sha-Nak and other dances were memorized and perfected at an elementary level, the monks of Tibet’s Namgyal Monastery were required to “offer examination” to their teachers. Before every Losar (Tibetan New Year), during the period between the Tibetan tenth and eleventh months (December-February), each monk in the new class took dance examinations by performing selected sections. Since each of the sacred dances is divided into parts, monks who studied particular roles were examined in those sections. “It is far different now from when we were in Tibet,” wistfully said dance master Ngawang Chonjor. “There, we were taught many, many different dances, and we were given an examination for each type of dance.”

The Tibetan twelfth month is the traditional time for a community gathering around Sha-Nak, in a large courtyard where additional dancers are integrated into the festive event. As in street theatre, the public is in close proximity to the performance. "The tantric deity Chogyel, our King of Dharma (Dharmaraja in Sanskrit), had in his retinue, sixteen male and female attendants, plus his female partner [tantric consort], Chamundi," clarified the dance master, of the added dancers.



Tibetan Folk Dance, Dharamsala, India, 1990 (photo: N. Rose)

This dance is, in fact, small compared to with others from old Tibet. Sacred dances frequently required as many as 108 (a significant number; for example, the number of prayer beads on a mala) monks requiring specified ornaments, objects and costumes, and necessarily performed in vast, flat spaces. "Although we have the masks now [newly created in exile]," said Ngawang Chonjor, "we have to make more costumes and start plans to teach and practice our dance traditions more. We have been limited in our ability to carry on our monastic dance tradition because the facilities and other things are not the same as in the past."

Accompanying and supporting the dancer-monks are traditionally twelve drummers, one chant master (Umzey), two long horn (dug-chen), two short horn (gya-ling), and two bone trumpet players. To the side and above, is the ritual education master (lob-pon). This monk holds one of the highest positions in the monastery and is responsible for proper enactment of rituals, including the preliminary meditations.

During the period of Ngawang Chonjor's training, most of the dancers studied two or three different roles. Surprisingly, monks were not necessarily chosen for their abilities as dancers but rather for typecasting purposes. A tall, lean monk could be selected to dance as the deity Dhamaraja, while a small, quick monk may be chosen to perform the Deer Dance (cha-grot). Regarding dance masters, their role was more to keep the dance moving than to train performer-monks in the perfection of movement. In some situations, dance leaders were chosen simply by lottery and were later given appropriate initiations; chanting ability sometimes took priority over dance expertise when selecting a dance master.

"In my first year, I took an examination in all the different parts related to the Sha-Nak," said, the Venerable. "I actually specialized in the role of Chamundi, which I studied gradually over several years." In addition, he performed the "Old Man's Long Life Dance" (gom-pa-tse-ring), a lengthy pantomimic work, added to Tibet's Namgyal tradition by H.H. the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who first saw it when traveling through Mongolia.

Ven. Ngawang Chonjor is one of the last surviving monastic dance masters trained thoroughly in Tibet and able to perform in the homeland prior to 1959. He still holds in his memory a significant portion of the rich Gar and Cham traditions, known only in abbreviated or truncated form by younger monks today. In order to clarify the meaning and purpose behind this unique artistic tantric expression, the dance master chose to discuss for these interviews, the dances of Gu Tor, a seven-day prayer festival, it's culmination being an entire day of dance. Namgyal monks were recognized throughout Tibet as experts in the execution of this difficult tantric externalized visualization, traditionally observed on the 29th day of the twelfth month.

While the Fifth Dalai Lama's Cham Yig is considered the authoritative work on monastic dance, many lesser cham yig were composed in order to preserve specific dances maintained by various monasteries. In a page-by-page commentary contained in the Cham Yig associated with the Gu Tor (or Day of the Great Discarding of Torma) festival, Ngawang Chonjr outlined the day's events. Systematically following the text, he briefly described the order in which dances were performed, with clarification of names and words chanted for each dance. The dance master additionally gave reference to the amount of detail within the text regarding actual procedures for correct execution of dance steps. The information, however, is considered esoteric, not to be shared with laypersons. He also specified that this dance text is specific only to Namgyal Monastery.

The Gu Tor is a full day-evening in-depth dancing experience, with audience and practitioners building anticipation toward a dramatically symbolic, even dangerous action to eliminate negativities. In a way, it's arguably like fireworks to bring in the New Year. The text describes all Cham associated with the deity Shinjey, (or Yama), also appearing as Yama Shinjey Shey, known as the Lord of Death, and his retinue. He is a fierce emanation of Jambe-yang, the Buddha of Wisdom (Manjushri in Sanskrit). The text, compiled by the council (governing body) of Namgyal Monastery at the time of the Seventh Dalai Lama, was composed as a guide for teachers.

"This book is not an actual text with a specific name but is a handwritten guide. The original was brought to India eleven or twelve years ago by somebody coming from Lhasa," explained Ngawang Chonjor. "After it arrived, each of us made copies because those of us who study Gar and Cham have to memorize the way of chanting, the words that are chanted, and the order. The dances described in this Cham Yig are specifically the Gu Tor, but the chanting is used in several different rituals."

Significantly, although the Cham Yig gives explanation of the actual movements of the ritual dances in the ' festival, there is no discussion of specific meanings associated with particular motions or even with overall segments. For clarification, the dance master explained, "On the outside, the dances are for the health of the physical body, but in terms of the mind, the purpose is more profound." Here he refers to the dancer's concentrative visualization of self as deity while in bodily motion.

The text indicates the Namgyal style of intoning melodic chant, notated with red and black curved parallel lines, colored for artistic sensibility rather than as indicators for interpretation. Other drawings represent the manner of vocal performance, as when the voice rises and falls, etc. There is no semiotic or notation system for indicating dance patterns, as all movements were taught only by means of transmission from teacher to student. Personal demonstration, explanation and individual corrections were the primary methods used to impart each dance from one generation to the next, however descriptive narrative is used in the text in order to facilitate accurate memory.

The day's events began with an invitation to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), repeated three times. Called Imbibing the Blessings, it was performed on the large cymbals (ro mo) by the Umzey. Toward the end of this preparatory musical pattern (joined by horns), a procession of the masters followed by horn players and drummers led a line of roughly 20 dancers who moved in a specified formation on the large platform of the open courtyard atop the Potala Palace. From this position, the dancer-monks were able to look up to view the private palace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was seated to observe the Gu Tor rituals.



After bowing in respect to His Holiness, each participant took his appropriate place on cushions surrounding the dance area.

The text continues to describe how, in a line of seven dancers, the masked figure Ha Shang and his two children, Ha and Trug, enter the performance space. These three pleasant characters serve as “sponsors” for the day’s events. According to the story as known by Ngawang Chonjor, there is some ambiguity as to the significance of Ha Shang in ritual Tibetan activity. The historical Ha Shang (or Yun Den, a Chinese monk associated with Chan Buddhism) had propounded a school of Mahayana philosophy which “associated emptiness with nothingness.” His system was declared by Tibetans as a “wrong view” and, having lost in debate, Ha Shang was expelled from Tibet. This doesn’t quite align with the generally accepted claim that when one loses in debate, the defeated debater must adhere to the belief system of the winner. At any rate, because the masked Ha Shang figure in the Gu Tor dance wears traditional Tibetan Buddhist chuba, shawl and the particular yellow robe worn for special religious occasions, Ven. Ngawang Chonjor speculates that Ha Shang may have been a tantric practitioner of Mongolian extraction. Indeed, perhaps after being defeated in debate, Ha Shang converted to Tibetan Buddhism and became a great tantric master. After tossing wheat flour into the air three times for the crowd’s well-being, this figure sits to the side of the performance space, with the two children, throughout the day. And with “a handsome, smiling face” serves the dual purpose of auspicious witness and protector.

Continued Ngawang Chonjor, “The very first dance is called sal-dul. Sa means ground; dul means to subdue or to tame. This preparing of the ground is preliminary for the dances. All these characters are wearing masks. One is the head of a yak, the other is the head of a deer. What is written in the Gu Tor Cham Yig is an actual numerical and word description of the counting of steps in these dances; the terminology and corresponding counts are given. Each beat is kept in mind by the dancers but mainly by the Umzey who is playing the cymbals. The dancers follow his rhythm.”

The name of the second dance is nga-pa. It has a series of 15 beats in three phases of five counts each. The dance master counted it with accents for us: “One, two, three, four, five, ONE; one, two, three, four, five, TWO; one, two, three, four, five, THREE, and it’s finished!” He smiled. “We say 15 but it’s really 18 beats.” The nga-pa is performed by two dancers; portrayal is of one male wrathful deity and one female wrathful deity.

“The third dance is called glu-pa, performed by two different dancers. Once again, it’s one male wrathful and one female wrathful deity, each wearing masks. While costumes are the same, the dancing is different. There is a series of these masked dances showing male and female manifestations of the enlightened mind.” Very tantric.

“The fourth dance is called gu-khang.” Since gu means nine and khang means only, the dance’s name is easy to translate as, ‘only nine beats.’

The fifth dance is known as lung-tsub. “It means rough wind (perhaps hurricane). This is a much more animated dance. Dancers are constantly in motion. They rarely stand on both legs. This is opposed to other dances where there is generally less activity and both feet are often in placement on the floor at the same time.”

“Our sixth dance is zhi-dro. Zhi means four; dro means movement. In the dance, the movement is emphasized by four beats.” Thus, the four-beat fourth movement.

Seventh of the Gu Tor dances is dun-gye-ma. Dun is seven, gye is eight. Dance master Ngwang Chonjor gave the accented count again: “One, two, three, four, five, six, S-E-V-E-N (elongated to connect with the following count) EIGHT; repeat.” The dance goes by the syllables of the chanted words; counts follow the same number of beats as recited words.

“The eighth dance is for two animal characters, the seng-gey (snow lion) and the chu-sin (alligator or crocodile, as it comes from the sea with wide mouth and sharp teeth).” These two beasts dance together.

“All these dances are classified as having one male and one female dancer [female roles always performed by monks]; the tantric male and his female tantric counterpart. Thus, there are eight male and eight female characters portrayed,” explained Ven Ngawang Chonjor.

The eight preliminary dances are followed by a series of activities which lead to the actual purpose of the Gu Tor dances. Four different monks who appear as Lords of the Cemetery (dressed in fitted costumes painted as the structured bones of a skeleton), with waving fingers and toes, and a large grinning skeleton mask surrounded by tiny skeleton heads) enter the ritual space and draw the form of a human body on a piece of paper. Once this is accomplished, the Lords of the Cemetery enact the process of looking for this image of a body that has been placed in the circle’s center. The then follow the process of finding and identifying it.

The dance master explained, “This particular drawing of a human form is symbolic of all persons who harm the Buddha’s teachings, and anyone who harms living beings. Further, it could be said it represents all the negative, harmful states of mind in anyone, including the beings in all six realms of human existence.” So, the paper form symbolizes negativity. “The Lords of the Cemetery who look for the effigy appear as mundane deities (not transcendent) or as non-deities.” They’re said to literally live in cemeteries and “have been seen as spirits by certain people.” Said Ngawang Chonjor, “The Lords of the Cemetery are based on karmic imprints and are a reminder of impermanence. They cause no harm.” Meditation in charnel grounds, and/or on the image of a skeleton, is a common practice for purposes of reminding Tibetan Buddhist practitioners of life’s impermanence, “and to counteract afflictive desire.” He added, “The general public must understand that these rituals have always been performed to benefit sentient beings.”

The next of the dances was the Old Man Dance (gom-pa-tse-ring); this along with others mentioned here, was seen as part of the tour, Dances from the Diamond Realm, sponsored in 1989 by Tibet House New York, in which monks from Namgyal Monastery showed portions of Gu-Tor ritual dance in a concert settings. The Old Man Dance is a dramatic piece which portrays the struggles of an elderly practitioner who confronts a man-eating tiger and calls upon his inner resources to defeat it. Certainly this is a metaphor for the aspirant’s continual battle with his own egoistic tendencies, continually threatening even into old age; and the strength available to rise into victory. Public showings like 1989 tour have generated considerable debate over the appropriateness of taking sacred dances out of their religious contexts. The hope is, however, that by exposing audiences to selected segments of these

dances, sufficient interest may be generated to reinstate these visually stimulating tantric practices into the larger context of the Buddhist community.

Sha-Nak (Black Hat Dance) followed the interlude during which the Old Man Dance was performed. This was the culmination of the day's events. The dance leader of Sha-Nak entered first, dancing by himself for a while in his role as principal dancer. Fifteen dancers then entered in a line, forming a circle around him. Sha-nak is characteristically harmonious, executed with flowing movements, appropriate to the flowing movements of the costumes. Viewer and dancer enter trancelike states when this dance continues for lengthy periods.

The evening ritual is Dep Cham (large ensemble ritual dance). The 34 monks who danced earlier, now return in new costumes to dance together. In essence, this is the grande finale. Said the Venerable, "The dance really related to the ritual is Dep Cham. Each of the wrathful dances of the morning were manifestations of deities not specifically related to the ritual." The first dancer-monk to appear in Dep-Cham was Chamundi, the female partner of Chogyel, who invites him into the ritual space. As she does so, all eight wrathful male and female deities stand out in the ritual area while horn, drum and cymbal players play inviting music, eventually bringing Chogyel (Dharmaraja) into the courtyard. He then performs his solo Cham, following which, the entire entourage danced together.

Once the Chogyel deity dance has concluded, the purpose of the Gu-Tor ritual is enacted theatrically. "The essential meaning of these dances is the removal and elimination of interfering influences and enemies that harm all sentient beings and Buddha's teachings." Ngawang Chonjor continued, "There is a vessel in which we pour tea. This part of the celebration is called Ser-khem (Gold Libation); it is offered to the lama, the yidam and the dharma protectors as an invitation to please be present. We ask them to perform enlightened activity to help in removing obstacles. To use an example from ordinary life, if you invite guests to your house, you offer tea." Tea offerings are followed by further requests for Chogyel and his retinue to remove hindrances and negativities.

Now approaching the drawing of the human body visualized as harmful influences, the monks are also visualizing themselves as particular deities and dharma protectors. They describe to the effigy a complete explanation of its wrongdoings, mistakes, wrong attitudes and incorrect behaviors. Finally, the effigy is told that, with a mind fully motivated by the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others, each deity chooses to manifest in wrathful form in order to destroy its evil influence.

During this time, verses known as "true words" were recited by everyone, including dancers and musicians who, imagining themselves as fully awakened "Buddhas and protectors and non-coarse subtle bodies" clarified their position by saying, "Because you are causing great harm, we must act without faulted attitude and with the mind of enlightenment as our main motivation to eliminate you, to remove you." It is understood that these undesirable forces are within each of us (thus the effigy's human form), and effect us as other forms as well.

War-like weapons, including a sword, curved knife, noose, iron chains, chopping knife, three-pronged staff, skull and ritual dagger were brought out by the Sha-Nak Cham-Pon. The dagger was thrust into the heart of the effigy, causing destruction of its consciousness by disconnecting it from body and allowing it to take birth in the Pure Realm. "The main principle of wrathful enlightened activity in tantric practice is for this purpose of destroying negative influences. From the short-term, immediate perspective, there is very violent action taking



place. “But unlike when someone must kill a goat for its own benefit, in this case the act is performed with a mind that has, as its foundation, the profound view of emptiness as well as the sublime attitude of the mind of enlightenment. The immediate visual presentation may be a violent act, yet the final result is that the ‘mind’ of the effigy is brought to a position that is utterly free from suffering. This explains the dynamics of forceful, wrathful activity.” Ngawang Chonjor spoke quietly.

The ensuing sequence was both dangerous and exciting. The effigy already symbolically transformed, the masked dancers encircled the ritual area. The Deer Dance performer then visualized and pantomimed cutting the effigy into pieces, scattering the remains. The paper itself was placed on a skewer above a fire pit on the side, supported by a vessel holding boiling oil. Into this skull cup filled with the oil, a specially trained Sha-Nak Cham-pon swiftly poured the cup’s contents below the oil, deep into the vessel. This contact caused a startling explosion, magically emphasizing the swift incineration of dark forces when attentive intervention is applied. Said the Venerable, of the Black Hat leader regarding proper training, “If he does this alcohol-in-oil correctly, the flames go bursting up; if not, the flames can’t reach high enough and only a dull sound is heard.”

The evening’s ritual performance concludes with the Returning Dance (lor cham). “The first to go back is the Deer Dance monk; Chamundi and Chogyel follow. All the other dancers go after them two-by-two. On the side, the Old Man Dance monk does a short series of movements and leaves. Then the ritual master of the Black Hat Dance, and one helper, leave together. Following that, the other Sha-Nak dancers depart two-by-two. Then, Ha Shang, his two children, the two Indians [not mentioned previously] and the Cemetery Lords, a total of seven, leave from their places. And in a formal line, the disciplinarian, chant master, horn players, drum players and cymbal players, all depart. Then there is a tsog offering (prayer ceremony).” Recitations and offerings are given.

“Not far from the ritual space, there is a heap of dry grass which is set ablaze. The cake offering is carried there and ritually tossed into the flames. This is the completion and everyone goes home. This very special day, this last day of the old Tibetan year, represents purification and cleansing of all the mistakes, harmful actions and faults accumulated throughout the year. These hurts and negative energies are completely purified before the beginning of the new Tibetan year.”

Ven. Ngawang Chonjor gave a few concluding details. “Monks were required to rise at 2:00 in the morning and devoted six hours to sitting practices, including prayers, necessary to prepare the mind to perform the dances and all rituals correctly.” The visualizations entailed imagining oneself as the deity being interpreted this deity, manifesting as the clear appearance of oneself as a fully awakened being. Regarding the practice of visualization with movement, the dance master said, “As we said, some of the characters represented are deities while some are not. The enlightened mind manifests in whatever form, in this particular world, which is suitable for overcoming and subduing the afflictions in people’s minds. For example, there is Yamantaka (Vajrabhairava) who appears as a buffalo. This is a wrathful emanation of Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom.” The venerable gave another smile. “It’s definite that the Buddha of Wisdom is not a Buffalo, but he may appear in that form because, as a buffalo, this form appropriately expresses that particular facet of enlightened mind for humanity.”

Wrapping up our four lengthy interviews, the dance master said, “From very early in the morning, we prepared to transform our ordinary appearance into ‘divine pride’ and clear

appearance of the deity. I have never seen any text book, other than our guide at Namgyal Monastery in Tibet - and now in India - which describes in detail, according to one monastic tradition, the rituals and traditions related to these dances, even though the Gu Tor was performed throughout Tibet." Venerable Ngawang Chonjor concluded, "The purpose of Tibetan sacred dance is to benefit all living beings as profoundly as possible."