

The most important events in the Bhutanese calendar are religious festivals. The major ones, which attract enormous crowds, are the *domchoes* and *tsechus*, held annually at the big monasteries and *dzongs* (enormous fortresses) all over the country. The dates vary from year to year, but most *tsechus* are held in autumn, which is a leisure period for farmers (although the very famous *tsechu* in the Paro Valley in western Bhutan is held in the spring). The highlight of a *tsechu* is the religious dances performed by monks and laymen in fabulous costumes and masks. Clowns known as *atsaras*—often carrying large wooden phalluses—entertain the crowds with their slapstick routines in between the dances. Many individual households hold their own private annual prayers, or *choku*, followed by a feast for the whole village.

Archery, or *dha*, is undoubtedly Bhutan's most popular sport. It is traditionally played with bamboo bows and arrows and two small targets placed approximately 145 meters apart at opposite ends of a field. (In international archery competition, the target is at a distance of only fifty meters.) Every village has an archery ground, and at important matches, the two competing teams are supported by lively groups of women "cheerleaders." On holidays, several archery matches can be underway at once. More and more common are expensive imported bows with pulleys that increase the speed and force of the arrows. They are coveted status symbols among Bhutanese archers, although traditional archers continue to use bamboo bows and arrows with great skill. *Khuru*, or darts, is another favorite sport played outdoors with the target placed at a distance of twenty meters.



A Meditation in Dance

by Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso

The *drametse ngacham* is a dance form that originated in Bhutan five centuries ago. Today, the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies is documenting the dance. The following is a rare insight into the tantric Buddhist teachings of this meditation in dance.

"If you know the purpose of the dance and what the dancers are visualizing, it is a very powerful experience," said a teacher at the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies. "Even the hair on my arm stands up as the trumpets, music, and intensity of the dance increase."

The *drametse ngacham*, one of Bhutan's best-known masked dances, was conceived in a powerful moment of intensive meditation. During a retreat, the dance came as a vision to a grandson of one of Bhutan's revered saints, Pema Lingpa.

In his vision, Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen saw three beautiful, celestial women (*dakinis*) dressed in silken gowns and adorned with garlands of precious stones. The celestial beings guided him to the abode of Guru Rinpoche, where the deities performed a dance. Guru Rinpoche, the eighth-century spiritual teacher who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, later instructed Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen to introduce the dance to the human world for the benefit of all living beings. Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen noted the choreography of the dance and taught it at the Thegchog Ogyen Namdroel Choeling Monastery in Drametse in eastern Bhutan.

Sixteen people perform and ten others provide musical accompaniment in the *drametse ngacham*, making it the perfect example of Bhutanese masked dance. Refined artistic skills and a flawless balance between dancers and instrumentalists result in fluid, uniform, and complex movements. *Drametse ngacham* has twenty-one parts and lasts more than two and a half hours. The dancers wear spectacular, colorful costumes and masks representing real animals and mythical beings. All the masks symbolize the wrathful and peaceful deities of the pure lands of celestial beings. The dancers become manifestations of these deities.

Time and space are instrumental in creating different versions of *ngacham*. For many years, the dance was performed in relative isolation in the Talo, Trongsa, and Gangteng

Archery, Bhutan's national sport, provides frequent opportunities for communities to gather for festive competitions. The holes found in bread box-sized targets, shot at a distance of 145 meters (approximately 475 feet), reflect the staggering accuracy of Bhutanese archers. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism



The *drametse ngacham* is a sacred masked dance that originated in central Bhutan more than 500 years ago. Inspired, according to Bhutanese Buddhists, by celestial performances in honor of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), the dance is revered throughout Bhutan and has come to signify the nation. By witnessing the dance and listening attentively to the sound of the drums, believers may acquire some spiritual enlightenment. UNESCO recognized the dance as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage in 2005. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

monasteries in central and western Bhutan. Today, *drametse ngacham* is widely performed in Bhutan; its choreography and meaning differ slightly from place to place.

Visualization is critical to *drametse ngacham*. The dancers picture the physical world, imagining it as the Buddha's land of magnificent glory, where all sentient beings are peaceful or wrathful deities with intrinsically pure, Buddha-like qualities. They visualize endless numbers of each deity, which slowly enter them and all things mortal to transform all ordinary beings into extraordinary deities. Finally, the beings and the deities become one. All visions are seen as manifestations of deities, all sounds as divine speech beyond human understanding, and whatever appears in the mind as the great realization of ultimate reality. The dancers establish spiritual contact with the audience through this powerful visualization, which serves to transmit the awakening state of mind to all who are watching. The *drametse ngacham* is truly a meditative art form.

The dancers must undergo rigorous training to achieve the right state of mind for the dance. This explains why the dancers and the ritual master have to complete a course in *ngondro* (preliminary meditation practice) and, if possible, a class in *losum chogsum* (a three-year and three-month meditation retreat). The physical dance itself requires years of training in order to attain perfect synchrony among dancers.

Unlike other dances, the *drametse ngacham* transcends the physical performance to become a means of enlightenment. It is a didactic way to impart the sacred Mahayana tantric teachings that epitomize the path to liberation and victory over negative and evil forces. The *drametse ngacham* is believed to

destroy all evils and natural calamities to establish peace and harmony. Dancers cultivate a pure vision that reflects the Buddhist concept of direct liberation from *samsara* (world of suffering). The dance exudes a spiritual energy that permeates the whole atmosphere.

The *drametse ngacham* is evidence of a unique living cultural expression. Its strong impact on society is articulated through its popularity in the whole of Bhutan and its dominance at most religious and secular ceremonies. The Bhutanese believe that this dance has the power to cleanse all defilements and negative mental actions of the dancers and the audience.

Bhutanese find the *drametse ngacham* spiritually empowering. They believe that a person has to see the dance at least once in life in order to be able to recognize the deities in the *bardo*—the intermediate state between life and death, where all the deities that appear in the *ngacham* are present to lead the deceased person to higher realms. The sacred texts state that, just by watching this dance, people can be liberated from rebirth or avoid rebirths in lower realms.

Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso is the director of the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies (ILCS). Under his stewardship, the ILCS has produced research on *drametse ngacham* (the Drum Dance from Drametse), which was designated by UNESCO in 2005 as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage. Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso, a scholar and monk, obtained a master's degree in Sanskrit from the University in Varanasi before joining the civil service of Bhutan.

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