

Durdak Cham: Dance of the Charnel Ground Masters

The dance of skeletal figures called *durdak* is a common artistic performance in Bhutan and other parts of the Himalayas. The term *durdak* (དུར་བདག) refers to *durtrö dakmo* (དུར་ཁྲོ་བྱི་བདག་མོ་) or the overlord of the charnel grounds. It is believed that the charnel grounds are haunted places with powerful spirits including both benevolent and malevolent ones. While there are many harmful and demonic spirits in the charnel grounds, the skeletal figures in the Durdak dance are said to represent the powerful positive forces. Bhutanese scholars on *cham* dance claim that the dance characters are the divine protector Palden Lhamo in her manifestation as spirits of the charnel grounds. It may be also noted that one of the dharma protectors well known in Bhutan and Tibet is Zhingchong Durthrö Dakmo (ཞིང་ཕྱོད་དུར་ཁྲོ་བདག་མོ་), a female protector deity.

While the culture and choreography of the Durdak dance developed in Tibet and Bhutan, the concept of *durdak* overlords of charnel grounds and tradition of charnel grounds as spiritual sites started in India. Even in the early days of Buddhism, charnel grounds, with their dead and decaying bodies, were considered as powerful sites to develop the awareness of impermanence, death, and foulness and fragility of the human body in order to overcome the attachment to one's life and body. When Vajrayāna Buddhism developed as a result of syncretic exchange with the non-Buddhist traditions, particularly the Śaiva tradition of *kapalika* or skull bearers, the charnel grounds came to be seen as power spots for spiritual liberation. This was because the charnel grounds were often the sites where the Mahāsiddhas, the maverick founders of Vajrayāna who worked on the fringes of society, dwell and carried out their antinomian spiritual practices to undo social prejudices and hierarchies.

Subsequently, the tantric Buddhists came to believe in the eight powerful charnel grounds which are among the sacred sites blessed by Heruka, the wrathful emanation of the Buddha. According to a Buddhist story common in Bhutan, the Buddha in the wrathful Heruka form is said to have tamed the destructive evil force of Rudra who was causing great harm to the sentient beings. The Buddha miraculously liberated the Rudra's consciousness, and slaughtered, blessed and scattered his physical corpse across the Indian landscape.

The areas, where the pieces of the Rudra's body landed are said to have been blessed in this process as power spots for tantric practice.

Thus, charnel grounds were seen as potent sites for spiritual practices. Beside the belief in the sites as being blessed by the Heruka, the sites were also convenient places to live fully liberated and free lives outside the society and its conventions. It was conducive for the tantric ethos of breaking free of the social taboos, hierarchies and strictures. The charnel grounds are also viewed as haunted places and thus a terrifying space to test one's sense of attachment to oneself and spiritual courage to face death and causes of fear and death. Many serious practitioners in Bhutan even today seek cremation grounds for their practice with the belief that they are haunted by spirits who can test one's sense of spiritual ease.

The Durdak dance represents the powerful spirits of the charnel grounds, particularly the positive ones, who aid a practitioner in overcoming the inner obstacles on the path to enlightenment. They destroy the inner obstacles of a spiritual practitioner such as attachment, fear, prejudice, etc. and external obstructions posed by evil spirits. They trap these obstacles, particularly the ultimate devil of the ego, and bring them to be ritually exterminated through a practice of ritual killing called 'liberation' (ལྷ་འདུག་གཞུང་།). To indicate this, the Durdak dance is often performed with four dancers carrying a triangular vessel in middle of a black rug. The vessel is laid in front of the wrathful Buddhas to be ritually killed or liberated.

The dancers wear skeletal masks, which resemble fleshless or skinless skull. The face has large ears and a three-piece tiara on the top. They wear a white jacket on the top and white pair of trousers, loose white gloves and socks, all of which have red stripes showing shapes of bones. Over the jacket the dancers wear the *dorjé gong* (རྡོ་རྗེ་གོང་།) or the adamantine shoulder cover and the *trab* (ཏཱལ་) sash forming a cross over them. Over the white trousers in the lower part, silk scarves of different colours are hung from a belt with the *mentse* designs covering the outside layer. They have no hand implements but often enter the dance stage holding one corner of the square black rug on which the triangular vessel is placed. The dance movements are very agile, acrobatic and abrupt ones accompanied by the music of a small *posing* (ཕོ་སྐྱོང་།) cymbal played in the background.

Like most other dances, the Durdak dance is performed by the monks and lay priests of the monasteries and villages during the festival. In

main state centres, it is performed by the members of the Royal Academy of Performing Arts or by state dancers. The dance is often performed by young men.

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