

Women Empowered Through Sacred Dance ~ A Teacher's Journey

Abstract:

This article goes into my personal journey of *the Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara* from first witnessing it, to then dancing it, and the progression into leading and teaching it. I start with the beginnings of the Dance, and the subsequent grass roots blossoming of it throughout the world. I explore how the Dance is a meditational movement journey of deep transformation, and how it affects the people dancing it as well as the ones witnessing it. Who is this mythological Tara and how has her influence come to us down through the ages? Feeling the depth of the Vajrayana Buddhist practices transmitted to us from Tibet, and how that forms the foundation of a dance that calls to contemporary women and men of all ages, is a topic worthy of exploration. The honoring of the dance by Tibetan Buddhist masters warrants its place in modern society.

Keywords:

Tara

Tibetan Buddhism

Movement Meditation

Mandala

Mudra

Transformation

"I see dance being used as communication between body and soul to express what is too deep to find words..." -- *Ruth St. Denis*

"To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak," -- *Hopi Indian Saying*

"Dance is the hidden language of the soul." -- *Martha Graham*

The Beginnings of the Mandala Dance

It was another brilliant sunny, balmy day in Maui, HI., USA, my home for the past eight years. I was sitting on the grassy lawn overlooking the vastness of the Pacific Ocean meeting the horizon of a clear azure blue sky. It was 1986 and what I didn't realize then was that I was about to witness the birth of a movement meditation that would grow to over 90 circles throughout the world, and nourish the hearts and minds of thousands of people. The *Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara* was

offered to His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche (the head of one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist lineages)(1). Afterwards he said he had never seen such an expression of devotion through dance.

He spoke with Prema Dasara (the main creator of the dance) (2) at length after the dance. He told her that she would teach worldwide, that the dance would ground a Festival of Prayer like the great Tibetan Monasteries, a cyclic celebration of peace, protection and abundance for the world community.

At first, this all came as quite a surprise to Prema Dasara. At the request of her teacher on Maui (Lama Tenzin)(3), she began to study the text of the 21 praises of Tara.(4) As a dancer, she just could not sit still to meditate and he said that was fine – walk the hills and do the practice. When Tara started dancing before her and within her, the creative impulse took root and the stirrings of a dance began to percolate. A friend of Prema’s dreamt of a golden spiral all night and approached Prema to ask if this meant anything to her. A light went on and the choreography of the current version of the dance was born. It was meant to be inclusive, not only for trained dancers, but anyone interested. (Dasara 2010: 5 – 9)

In the next five years, the dance was offered to all the visiting Lamas (5) and teachers that came to Maui – all gave their blessings and encouragement after witnessing the dance.

Prema and the Maui Tara dancers offered the dance once again for His Eminence Tai Situ and he proclaimed that this is a sacred dance, a cham (the Tibetan word for sacred dance), where people can experience a level of meditative absorption giving rise to an accumulation of merit and wisdom. He gave her his blessings and encouraged her to start an organization, which became Tara Dhatu. He explained that the dance is a lineage practice and that the organization would help her take care to maintain the integrity of the precious dharma within the dance.

Prema had begun to travel and teach the Mandala Dance of Tara around the world. Her first out of country stop was during the Kalachakra initiation in Toronto. During the ceremonies His Eminence Jomgon Kongtrul asked her to teach the dance to Tibetan women and children in Sikkim, at the Karmapa’s (6), monastery.

Word of mouth moved quickly and soon invitations for Prema were more than she could manage. In Seattle, Anahata Iradah offered to provide live music, and for the next ten years contributed her exquisite musical talent as well as filmmaking and networking to further the reach of the dance. Prema and Anahata (a mentor in the

1)Tai Situ Rinpoche is the head of the Kagyu Lineage. The four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism are Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Gelug

2)Prema Dasara – founder and spiritual and creative director of Taradhātu organization

3) Lama Tenzin was a Rime teacher – non sectarian. He founded the Maui Dharma Center in HI.

4)to learn about all 21 praises, see the book, “Dancing Tara” by Prema Dasara

5)Lama is a title of a teacher of dharma in Tibetan Buddhism. Similar to the Sanskrit term Guru, or teacher of a spiritual path.

6) the Karmapa is the 17th incarnation in a long line of Kagyu teachers. His title means, “the embodiment of all the activities of the Buddhas”.

DUP (Dances of Universal Peace)), began to travel together around the world. They had an open door to all of the DUP circles that also engage in sacred dance. The *Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara* began to catch fire wherever it was offered.

Description of the dance

The *Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara* is a unique form of meditative practice. Participants 'become' Tara by dancing Her 21 Praises. They embody a felt sense of the goddess Tara by engaging in ritual hand and body gestures called mudras. The meaning of the Sanskrit word 'mudra' translates as 'closure' or 'seal'. Many people think of mudras as only hand movements, but in truth when we use our whole body as a mudra we are affecting the energy flow of the psycho-physical constituents of our Being.

We begin by the dancers invoking Tara within a crescent moon mandala. Mandala is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the Universe. It's loosely translated as 'circle', yet it can also depict a square, or in some cases, a crescent moon. After calling on Tara to come and share her blessings, the dancers walk into a spiral shape, forming a set of concentric circles. Seen from above, this part of the Mandala is shaped like the peace symbol. Prepared to dance as Tara, one by one the dancers are born out of the intricate mandala formation to dance one of the Praises of Tara as an offering to the world. Each praise is four lines, about 1 minute long. That one minute can feel like a timeless eternity where the dancer and the dance are one. By dancing Tara's praises, dancers reveal their inner nature as an aspect of the Goddess Tara. The body moves and Tara appears through the movements. It is not something channeled from without, it is something that arises from within.

The dancers progress to the point of their "birthing" (stepping out of the spiral to dance their praise) following a spiral formation. The Spiral is an ancient symbol of the feminine principle. The spiral holds the form, the structure; the interpretation of the praises invites each person's creativity. Using our bodies like this in a ritual dance creates a deep transformation on mental, emotional, and spiritual levels, thereby leading to an expansion of consciousness. We lose the identification with the small self and become one with the deity. Each dancer chooses (or at times is assigned) a praise and creates her own choreography. As an example, Here is Praise number fifteen, Tara is Serene Peace:

Praise her the one who is Bliss, Virtue, and Peace

Her activity is the peace beyond suffering

With the pure sounds of Om and Soha

She purifies all negativity and guilt

Each woman feels into what this means to her and how she can best portray that

through her movements.



Phyllis Moses dancing Serene Peace at the annual Kauai Tara Camp. Photographer unknown

By embodying the different qualities into her life, it's as if a seed is planted. We water these seeds with devotion, mindfulness, and contemplation so as to ripen our inherent wisdom and compassion. We feel the power of the qualities in our body.

An aspect of Tantra (7) is that it utilizes all the senses. For a formal offering dance, we have colorful costumes, generally sari's (8) are used, but there are other elegant costumes designed and used by groups around the world. Each Tara is depicted by a certain color (i.e. Central Tara is green, Serene Peace is white.).



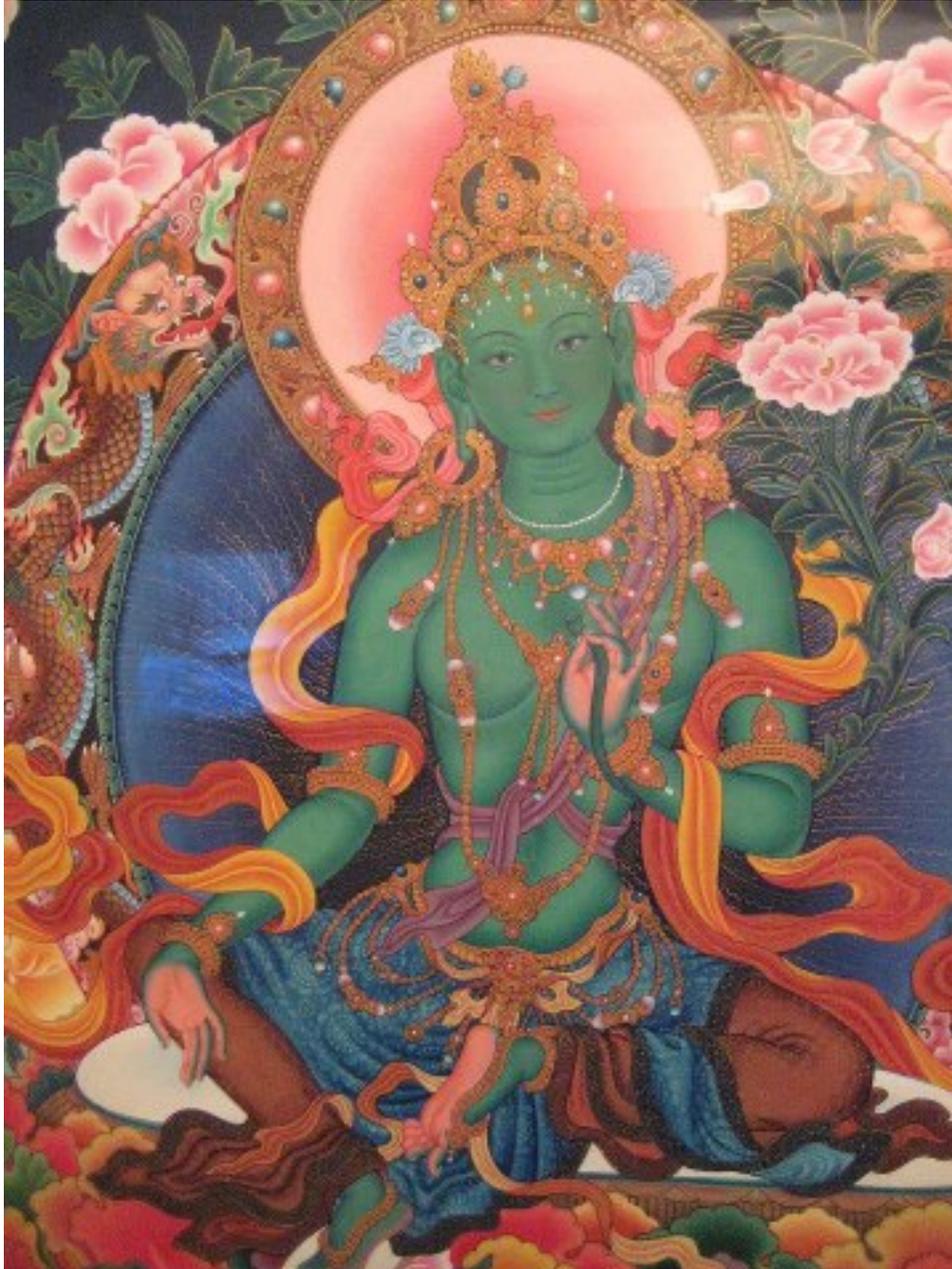
Tonasket 2nd Annual Tara Festival 2014. left to right: Mary Engel, Carmella, Spurlin, Becky Watts, Phyllis (center), Life Has Meaning, Kim Abbey, Julia Sanderson, Su Ianello, Jenn Steinshouer. Photographer James Moore

In preparation to offer the dance, we set aside a two hour time period to dress helping each other with make up, crowns, etc. We adorn ourselves to enhance the feeling of transformation into the deity. In many traditional dances of the world, people take hours to prepare for the offering dance, which is part of the ritual transformation. It takes at least a weekend to learn and attune, to be more receptive and aware of the qualities that we are manifesting together before offering a Mandala Dance to the community; although Prema prefers to do this in a week long retreat.

Who is Tara, and how does she still appear?

Buddha Shakyamuni (around 500 BC) gave many teachings about Tara. She is known as The Great Mother, the Swift Protectress ~ She who removes all fears. She is known as Mother since she helps to birth our own inherent wisdom and compassion; to realize the true nature of who we are. (9) Tara is acknowledged in many different cultures. She is spoken about in India; she is the mother Goddess in the Druid religion; she is a sea goddess in Polynesian mythology; we find the Hill of Tara in Ireland ~ which was the ritual site of the ancient high kings there; there are rivers, mountains, and villages named after her. There are legends in India and Tibet that Tara comes from another star system, or that she was born from the tears of

Avalokiteshvara (10). And in each circumstance she vowed to return life after life in the body of a woman, until every Being is liberated.



Green Tara Thangka

Why are there 21 praises of Tara? It is a symbolic representation of 21 techniques that the Buddha taught to attain enlightenment. It is also said that we have 21 'knots' in our subtle energy system, and by saying the mantra of Tara, it is one way to begin to untie the knots. This is the more experiential qualities that are not easily spoken about. Many writings talk about the outer, inner, and secret meaning of Tara's praises (Sherab & Dongyal 2007:53-171).

Because of the strongly devotional character of Tibetan Buddhists, this Tara mantra

is known by almost everyone and said from the time they are young (Shaw 2006:345-350). Many Tibetans when fleeing Tibet under the Chinese invasion, said

7) Tantra has a broad range of definitions, the simplest is that it is the name given by recent scholars to a style of meditation and ritual which arose in India. Another simple way to describe it is the definition meaning 'thread'. The thread that unifies all of life.

8) about 6 yards of silk, wrapped and draped gracefully over the body. A traditional dress of India

9) from Tara's Enlightened Activity book, and Wikipedia – about Tara

10) Avalokiteshvara is the Buddha of Compassion

that just by reciting Tara's mantra their lives were spared, or miraculous circumstances would arise that helped them escape (Sakya 1990: 298-306). From the time of the Buddha until now, when the teachings get lost or dissipate, new teachings are revealed, teachings that are appropriate to the current times. In the 1800's Chogyur Lingpa had a vision and this practice of Tara was written down. (Tulku Orgyen Rinpoche 2007:14). It is this text that the Mandala Dance is based upon. People throughout the ages have felt this power of transformation that Tara evokes, even if they're not aware of her origins or meaning.

Background of the dance

As one of my teachers, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche said, "Pure Being is like water, the same no matter what the container. Yet the container can be a porcelain cup, a fine china tea cup, or a styrofoam cup" (11). Each tradition emerges from a cultural context. Whatever vehicle or container we use, it's beneficial to remember a spacious view of where we aim to go. Buddhism in Vietnam, India, Tibet, Japan, Thailand, Mongolia, China, or Korea all have a flavor of their particular country. There are many forms of practice, all have one essence.

On Maui, in the mid- eighties there was a community of people, mainlanders who had moved there because we wanted a different life, a life closer to the land, away from the stresses of modern society (and this was before computers and iphones!!). This exodus arrived in the Hawaiian islands, starting as early as the late 60's – a time of many innovative changes in our American culture.

The local Hawaiians, a melting pot of the Polynesian culture with Chinese, Japanese, Philipino, and Portuguese settlers, held the land to be sacred. The principles that informed that culture were those of aloha ~ to share our sacred breath with each other, to honor the Earth (the aina), to feel the inter-connectedness with nature and each other.

Our sub culture within this subculture drew close. We shared so much of our lives together: raising our children, starting schools for them, growing our food, and gathering together for spiritual communion, along with playful sojourns in the cleansing ocean and jungle pools.

We were searching for truth and someone requested His Eminence Kalu Rinpoche (12) to please send us a teacher. We were given a wonderful and precious Tibetan

Buddhist teacher, Lama Tenzin (14), whose far seeing visions, created a ripple that

11) spoken at a retreat in Seattle, WA. 2005

12) Kalu Rinpoche (1905 – May 10, 1989) was a [Buddhist](#) lama in the Kagyu tradition, [meditation](#) master, [scholar](#) and teacher. He was one of the first Tibetan masters to teach in the West.

13) 14) Lama Tenzin (1938-2001) was the first resident teacher of the Maui Dharma Center. He studied in the Geluk and Kagyu traditions and taught in a Rime style (inclusive of all traditions)

has spread and continues to influence thousands of people world wide. The sheer humility and 'behind the scenes' countenance of Lama Tenzin was a testimony to the power of these Buddhist practices that he so sincerely and lovingly wanted to share with us. At first Lama Tenzin did not know what to do with this wild bunch of 'barbarians', freedom loving rebels at heart. It was Lama Tenzin that encouraged Prema Dasara after witnessing her presentation of the classical Odissi dance training she received in India. She created the Mandala Dance as an offering to him, never expecting it to become such a phenomena. He continued to encourage her until his death in 2001.



Offering the Mandala Dance to Lama Tharchin Rinpoche and Lama Tenzin, 1992; Prema Dasara in red in front. Photographer unknown

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there are two ways that teachings are transmitted, through kama (passed from teacher to student, or parent to child), and terma (teachings 'appearing' to individuals at the right time to benefit beings of that generation). In the days when Vajrayana Buddhism was arriving in Tibet, there are stories of female teachers revealing sacred dance termas which they shared with their students, wearing colorful costumes and dancing in the temples or within the charnel grounds ~ sharing the precious transmission of the Dharma (14).

We feel very much in that same line of experience. We are a group of people who have no qualms in relinquishing the old forms of practice. We are on new soil, planting the seeds of harmony and compassion, cultivating our inner wisdom so generously shown to us by our precious teachers, the pioneers who have brought the Dharma to the West.

Personal journey, reconnecting with the dance

When I saw the Mandala Dance of Tara in 1986, it was the third time the dance had been offered on Maui. I had heard about it, yet my child was quite young at the time and I was not able to get away to attend the practices. I sat with my baby on the grass, near HE Tai Situ Rinpoche and found the dance as enchanting for me as it was for the dancers in the dance. There were moments where any separation between observer and observed fell away. I was carried into the meditative absorption of the dancers and felt my heart opening as the power of the practice was transmitted through the dancers. I thought I would be too shy to ever want to get up and dance in something like this, so I was grateful to feel as if I was a part of it while simply observing.

After receiving encouragement from HE Tai Situ Rinpoche, the Mandala dance continued to be offered to the community, in a once a year Festival of the Great Mother; as well as to various spiritual teachers that came to the island, one of which was Lama Tharchin Rinpoche (15)

14) mentioned by Lama Tsultrim Allione at a weekend retreat on Whidbey Island, Sept. 2014

15) Lama Tharchin Rinpoche (1936-2013) was a [Dzogchen](#) master of [Vajrayana](#) Buddhism. He was the tenth lineage holder of the Repkong [Ngakpas](#). This is a family lineage of yogis, or householders, and was the largest community of non-monastic practitioners in Tibet.

I made a heart connection with Lama Tharchin Rinpoche in 1993, when he came to Maui and the Mandala Dance was first offered to him. A dear friend invited me to participate in the Offering Goddess' Dance, one of the preliminary opening dances that preceded the offering of the Mandala. It was much less of a time commitment, and our sons' could play together while we practiced the dance.

Could it have been the dance that softened my heart and helped me to receive the magnitude of the teacher? After offering the dance and taking teachings from this Lama, my heart flew open and I started doing the ngondro (16) practices, which the teachers often spoke about but I thought were too long, too complicated, and just 'not my thing'! After feeling the blessings of Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, I too began to dance in the full Mandala of Tara.

Flash forward to the early 2000's. After 21 years living on my beloved Hawaiian Island of Maui, I wanted a change and felt it was time to drop back into the culture I had dropped out of so long ago. My son was ready for high school and I thought it

would be good for him to get a taste of popular American, mainland culture. I wanted to expand my horizons professionally and touch more people lives' and to be closer to the Tibetan Buddhist teacher that so lovingly took me under his wing.

My move to the mainland was exciting and at the same time a bit of a shock. This was not the culture I dropped out of 21 years earlier, it was now even more speedy, run by technology, and overrun with malls and materiality. My Buddhist practice kept me grounded and sane, maintaining my bodhisattva vows (17). My attitude towards the Mandala Dance had shifted. I felt that it was a thing of the past, a remote and fun pastime with my Island friends, from a time when we all lived a more leisurely life. I forgot about the Mandala Dance and dove further into traditional Buddhist retreats in the Vajrayana tradition.

It was after a one week traditional Vajrayana Buddhist retreat taught by Lama Yeshe Wangmo using the sadhana (18) she translated from the Dudjom lineage terma of Yeshe Tsogyal (one of the most celebrated female figures of Vajrayana Buddhism), that I returned to Seattle and heard that Prema Dasara was in town to teach the Mandala Dance. I thought it would be a good opportunity to see her again and also participate in the dance that had been such an informative experience of my life.

The dance took on a whole new dimension this time!! After tilling the soil of my mind with the seated sadhana all week, here I was LIVING the experience of the Deity Yoga practice! I am a kinesthetic learner and in participating in the Mandala Dance it brought the traditional practices to life in a deeper way than ever before.

16) the extensive foundational practices of Vajrayana Buddhism

17) Bodhisattva vows are the wish to not only eradicate ones' own suffering, but to also work for the benefit of all beings.

18) sadhana means a daily spiritual practice; can include meditation, mantra, contemplation or studying texts.

The Mandala Dance is built upon the traditional format of a complete sadhana; a practice that starts with motivation, refuge, bodhisattva vows, and goes into the main body of the practice – recitation of mantra, etc., even including tonglen – taking and sending; and then concludes with the dissolution of the practice (all is empty), we arise again as the Deity, and dedicate the merits of the practice for the benefit of all Beings. Bokar Rinpoche (another beloved Lama that Prema Dasara had studied with), said that this dance brings many blessings to all who witness the dance ~ no separation between observer and observed, just as I had experienced.



Maureen Freehill, owner of Butopia, on Whidbey Island, WA. center - Phyllis Moses, to her right - Diana Ferdana. Photographer unknown

Bokar Rinpoche was very supportive of the practice and guided Prema in intensive retreats based on Tara (Dasara 2010:9).

In traditional Vajrayana practice there are the creation and completion phases of practice with the deity. The Mandala Dance brought that to life for me this time, feeling experientially in my bones, so to speak, that which I thought I 'understood' intellectually. Now both sides of my brain were in sync, along with my embodied experience of bodhicitta – the noble heart. I also realized that after these many years

I had drifted away, Prema kept traveling and spreading the dance,

Together with Anahata Iradah, Prema had organized Pilgrimages to India and Nepal. The dance was offered to the Tibetans in diaspora including many Lamas and Rinpoches. At Dharamasala, they danced for the Dalai Lama. He even met them in a private audience and gifted Taradhatu with a beautiful Tara statue in appreciation for their work. My eyes opened to a deeper understanding of the power of this practice. I had an inkling of why Tai Situ Rinpoche had encouraged Prema to create an organization and keep the teachings close to her ~ a new lineage was birthed! The power of the practice had grown through the years, imbued with the blessings of so many exalted teachers. Tara had magnetized me closer to her heart!

At this time there was a monthly circle in Seattle and when I could, I started going to it. But after a couple years, the woman who started it, moved and the circle dissolved. I felt the absence and was prompted by Tara to start a circle and hold the post, so to speak. This was not like me, but I figured that even if no one showed up, it was my commitment to Tara, and that's where it all started.



Left to right: Kim Jacobs, Su Ianello, Jenn Steinshouer, Mary, Leah, Phyllis Moses (center), Lauralee Carey, Spurlin, Mary Engel, Life Has Meaning, Julia Sanderson. Photographer unknown

Dagmola (as Jamyang Sakya is lovingly called), the wife of Jigdral Rinpoche, head of the Sakya lineage, has a deep affinity with the goddess Tara. She developed a friendship with Prema who had led the dance in the temple for many years. She asked Prema to make the Mandala Dance a yearly tradition at the Sakya Monastery of Seattle and this tradition has been maintained.

I am now one of several senior teachers trained to lead the weekend Mandala

Offerings.(19) Prema prefers to concentrate on leading longer retreats. This year she will be leading retreats in May in Brazil, in June in Bali, in August on the north

19) the Taradhatu organization recognizes up to 4 levels of teachers. As a level 3 teacher, one can share the dance publicly. All teachers have been trained by Prema Dasara.

shore of Kauai, and in November near Tucson Arizona(20). Learning the teachings and the background of how Vajrayana Buddhism works with the mind and subtle energy body, lays a very rich foundation to express ourselves through the dance. Because we have had so many dancers attend some of the retreats there have been many creative configurations such as two Mandala's formed where the dancers come out and dance their praise together. When the Mandala dance is offered publicly, only women dance in the Mandala. Prema envisioned this as a dance of empowerment for women, but so many men also wanted to participate so she created a position for the men to be a part of the dance by dancing as protectors around the mandala. This creates a beautiful synergy of male/female energies, since we each have both sides within us and we are all striving to balance these sides. We learn about this more in depth when we study the 5 Buddha families, the Dakas and Dakini's ~ the symbolic explanations of how best to work with the Mysteries of this human life.

When I first dove into the traditional Vajrayana practices, I participated in the Ling Dro dances (as taught by Lin Lerner). I asked Lin how she became involved in teaching the Ling Dro dances, after all, they 'appeared' to be simple folk dances to our untrained western eyes. Lin said she was studying modern dance in college and she saw the Tibetans performing these dances, and thought to herself, "I want to know who is the Dancer behind the dance", which led her on the noble path of dedicated practice (Lerner 1983:50-57). The Tibetans by and large are a very embodied culture. Their refined cultivation of themselves shows in the effects they have on people when performing their dances. Traditionally, the Lama dances were only performed by men. Women could do the Dakini dances, but these were limited.

The Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara is assisting us in cultivating and integrating the power of these ancient teachings, so we too can embody this rich spiritual heritage of cultivating awareness and developing the noble mind. Our potential is cultivated when we are with the sublime teachers whose unshakable confidence in our original perfection helps us to recognize these qualities within ourselves. We become entrained (21) and get a taste of our inherent possibilities. At some point we need to also have this unshakeable confidence in our True Nature, which gives rise to compassion for all Beings who perhaps have not yet recognized this in themselves. When we call on Tara in this very embodied dance, we can more easily become her. If we are new to the dance and are amongst experienced dancers, it's as if we are carried along. We are able to move beyond the conceptual mind because there are so many moving parts to the dance that we learn to rely on the intuitive mind and let the practice penetrate our body. By working with each of the

20)for updated info: <http://www.taradhatu.net/eventsupcoming-events/prema-dasaras-schedule/>

21)entraining is a process of falling into synchronicity with what's around you. Being incorporated and swept along in its flow.

21 praises, we begin to see these qualities come to life in our interactions with others.



Spurlin dancing praise # 8 - Destroys Negativity. Tonasket, WA. 2014. Photographer - James Moore

As in traditional Buddhist practice, this dance is not about bolstering the ego. When we taught for a week at the 13th Sakyadhita Buddhist Women's Conference, one professional dancer walked into the class and was surprised that most of the women did not look like dancers! Here she was, having performed her Buddhist dances in many prestigious conferences, and perhaps having a bit of arrogance about that. What she realized after participating in the dance, was that it wasn't about how 'professional' she was, it became a deeply humbling and enlivening experience for her. Working in a group movement meditation practice like this always shows us more about our mind. We can participate in the purifications of the 7 branch offerings, but how do we react if we find that someone took our costume, or keeps messing up and distracting us? Old patterns tend to be revealed, such as when Lila* who had been dancing for many years, wound up in the central Tara position, she was always backwards (facing towards the back of the circle rather than the front). Later she revealed that she was a breech baby – facing the wrong way! Rita* kept

finding fault with Anne* in front of her, who wound up not returning the next day. It's very rare that someone would not return, and then we find out from Rita that her mother had abandoned her too and this woman Anne, who left had the same name as Rita's mother!

It's one thing to have our minds wander when we sit on our own cushion, but quite another thing when we have a highly synchronized choreography where we each depend upon each other. The river stones become smooth by bumping up against each other. This practice helps fill in the blind spots we might have when we are only sitting on the cushion. Movement and dance is a complementary practice to traditional Buddhist practices. One of the things I love about the Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara is that it casts a wide net. Many people are drawn to it that are not even familiar with Buddhism. And over time there are those that have been drawn in and continue to explore the Buddhist path, even to the point of becoming nuns. We (meaning the Taradhatu organization) have had women of all ages dance, from the time of their first menses up to 86 years old. We have one dance leader who teaches women with disabilities. Everyone has the same desires to feel more wisdom and contentment, to navigate the challenges that life brings. Dance does not need to be limited to a certain body type or age. The Buddha said that the body holds much wisdom. How we learn to listen to that wisdom is part of the path of awakening.

*names have been changed

The blessings of the teachers

In the interview with the Dalai Lama (in Dharamsala, India 2001 on the DVD The Quiet Revolution), he spoke about how Tara is like the wind, and when we dance and sing her mantra we are working with the subtle winds of our energy system, clearing any 'knots' so that we can abide in the wisdom channels.

On the last Taradhatu pilgrimage to India (Jan/Feb. 2013), we had the incredible good fortune to meet with Prema Dasara's Odissi dance teacher who she had not seen in 25 years. A very skilled and humble man, Guru Ramani Ranjan Jena was delighted seeing what Prema had created. He said he always knew she would not do something traditional. We met with him at the 64 Yogini Temple of Hrapur, India, an ancient open roofed circular temple dedicated to the goddess, with beautiful stone carvings on every inch within the walls. We all felt like we were part of a long lineage of dancers. Even if the Devadasi's (22) go underground at some points of history, the dancer's still emerge! We felt no separation as we danced for Prema's teacher under the clear blue sky, surrounded by the remnants of an ancient civilization that honored the feminine.

One teacher likened the spiritual path to dying a fabric indigo. You first dip the white cloth into the dye and it comes out light blue. You dip again and the shade becomes a little darker. You keep dipping the cloth until finally it becomes a deep

rich indigo blue. As we encounter these practices, we keep dipping and cultivating a spiritual vitality. This gives us the power to break through patterns that hinder us from realizing our true nature. When we look at a thangka (23), it has layer upon layer of symbolic meaning. Each culture works with the symbols that speak to the subconscious mind. Just as when a lake is calm we can see to the bottom, when our mind is calm, we can experience the luminosity of the mind. There are 2 places in the Mandala dance where we dissolve the visualization and let go into emptiness. In Sanskrit it's called shunyata, the unmanifest, yet capable of giving rise to all phenomena. Within Buddhist practice, there is a place where we let go of the visualizations, we don't even want to get attached to that!

In Vajrayana Buddhism we often hear about the outer, inner, and secret practices. What is meant by secret is not necessarily that you can't tell anyone, but it's not until you actually do the practice, that the experiential secrets are revealed. When we do these practices we are transported to a transcendent state that is not easily spoken about. This is what tantra is; we use all of the senses, and all of our experiences on the path to weave a seamless integration of spirituality into every experience of our life.

The promise of this practice lies in each persons' experience and what this opens up for them. Realization is never static, everyone strives for the opportunity to taste the transcendent and numinous qualities that lie within. Life asks us to be flexible, and this is what the Buddhist practices work with. Challenges arise when we try to

22) Devadasi means 'servant of God', and that is the term used to describe the ancient Temple dancers.

23) a thangka is a painting on cotton, or silk appliqué, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala of some sort.

quantify, intellectualize, and categorize what is new, to fit it into more traditional forms. We stand on the shoulders of who went before us, yet we also need to look ahead and integrate the creative and innovative aspects of ourselves and what our culture has to offer.

The experience of this dance was so well articulated in a statement by Katie Carter from Seattle, WA.:

"Words cannot express how much this weekend has meant to me. Sunday evening and all Monday I was still in our sacred space basking in the feeling of the dance and with Tara. I was nervous before we danced and at one point, I looked up at Tara. My nerves fell away as I let go and welcomed Her within. To feel Her and for those moments be Her was incredibly powerful. Thank you so, so much for sharing the dance with us; it was truly an honor to be a part of this wonderful weekend."



Left to right: Karen Lindquist, Katie Carter, Phyllis Moses, Sarah Bien, Rev. Judith Laxer, Suzie Scollon, Michael Douglas (protector). Seattle March 2014, photographer unknown

The dance is spreading through the magnetism of Tara's grace. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has the nuns at his monastery in Nepal dancing it. He then asked his students in Tonasket, WA. to learn the dance and hold an annual Tara Festival to benefit their community. It has been my privilege to lead them in fulfilling this request.



2014 Tara festival in Tonasket. Left to right: Julia Sanderson, Mary Engel, Carmella, Spurlin, Jenn Steinshaouer, Life Has Meaning, Phyllis Moses, Becky Watts, Su Ianello, Kim Abbey. Photographer James Moore

Our Japanese dancers offered these prayers at the site of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The list goes on, as the darkness of these times abound, the Light and upliftment of Tara's praises resound. We will again attend the Sakyadhita Women's Conference in Indonesia in 2015, and plans are being laid to have a 5 day prayer festival in Brazil ~ a Monlam, where the long sadhana of the 21 Praises will be danced by 108 dancers and Tara's mantra will be repeated for the whole length of the monlam (prayer festival).

To explore more about the dance, we invite you to go to: www.taradhatu.org

If you find yourself being drawn to learn more about Tara experientially, go to the website to find a circle dancing near you.

Phyllis Moses has been in private practice as a Health Educator for the past 25 years. With a Psychology degree background, and as a long time Buddhist practitioner, she is weaving together her extensive experience by teaching yoga, HypnoBirthing, working with a cutting edge medical device for optimum health, as well as painting rainbow silk scarves. She is a Level Three Tara Dhatu Teacher and leads a circle of dance in the Puget Sound Area of WA. She also leads the Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara whenever and wherever she is called to share it. She works with people through skype and phone as well. www.phyllismoses.com

