

Embassy of India
Thimphu

India@75 – Talk and Screening of ‘Sacred Buddhist Dance’ film by Benoy Behl on 25 May 2021

Question and Answer Session

Q1. From **The Royal Academy** to everyone: 4:08 PM

All the Chams fall under Buddhism and the significance of the Chams are also same all over the places, but why does the steps and design of the masks are different in different regions?

(Leki Om - Grade 12)

Benoy Behl: The Truth is always the same, but it is passed on through the living experience of each teacher and practitioner, therefore its form varies a little each time. This is the beauty and essence of experiential knowledge, which is lived and felt deep inside us. Thus, different traditions of Cham have developed across the Vajrayana Buddhist regions, with various designs of masks and movements. However, it must be remembered that the essence is always the same and the purpose is deep meditation.

Q2. From **Rinchey Dorje** to everyone: 4:10 PM

Guru Padmasambha appears in the form of eight manifestations and how is it related to the life of Guru Rinpoche?

(Paro College of Education)

Benoy Behl: The different manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava, as well as the incidents of his life, all highlight his many attributes. We are inspired by these, in order to awaken the qualities of Buddhahood within us.

Q3. From **Jigme Thinley** to everyone: 4:14 PM

In your observation, which do you think was more effective, paintings or chham, in dissemination of Buddhism?

Benoy Behl: Both paintings and Cham have served, each in its own way, to spread the knowledge of Buddhism. Paintings were of two kinds mainly. One was paintings made on Buddhist manuscripts. These served a very valuable purpose of transmitting knowledge over long distances, as these manuscripts were originally brought from Nalanda and Vikramshila Universities and were taken across Tibet, Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas. Two, wall paintings in Buddhist monasteries and temples have been of great help in conveying the knowledge of deities to the people.

Cham has played an equally important role in the life of the Buddhist worshippers. There is a great social contract between the Lamaji Cham dancers and the people. This is an advanced form of meditation, in which the Lamaji sheds his day-to-day personality, to become the deity he has chosen to meditate upon. Through his re-living of the qualities of the deity and his expression of these in the Cham, the gathered worshippers hope to experience glimpses of that great truth. They hope to awaken within themselves a little of the grace of the deity, which is presented by the Lamaji.

Both paintings and Cham have played an equally important role in spreading Buddhist knowledge.

Q4. From **Rinchey Dorje** to everyone: 4:15 PM

How does the name differ in terms of Padmasambha and Ugyen Rinpoche though it is synonymous?

(Paro College of Education)

Benoy Behl: Different names are used for Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche. All the names of this great teacher ('the Lotus Born', 'the Precious One'), highlight different aspects of the importance of his teaching. The Guru is of fundamental importance in Indic philosophy, as he shares his

experiential knowledge of the truth. Without this re-living of the truth, knowledge cannot be transmitted.

Q5. From **Tshering Yangki** to everyone: 4:16 PM

Are there any similarities between these Buddhist dance and Chhau mask dance of India.
(College of Language & Culture Studies)

Benoy Behl: The purpose of dance everywhere and in all faiths in ancient India was the same. It was meditation and the sharing of sacred grace. In fact, what are today called classical dances and performed on the stage for audiences that clap, were all originally meant to be forms of meditation.

Meditation means to shed our desires and concerns in the material world around us, to lose one's ego and to awaken the deity within us. At the time of the dance, the onlookers should not see the person of the dancer, but should see the deity instead. Therefore, in the Cham dance, in Chhau and in other dances, sometimes masks are used to hide the mundane personality of the dancer.

Q6. From **The Royal Academy** to everyone: 4:18 PM

In your opinion, where was the first Cham performed by Guru Padmasabhava or where did the Cham originated from?
(Kinzang Dorji - Grade 12)

Benoy Behl: There are no clear records of where the Cham originated, but it is likely that it was performed in the Valley of Kashmir, before Guru Padmasambhava brought it to the trans-Himalayas. We must remember that the Yogachara school of Buddhism flourished in Kashmir since the 4th century CE. Some believe that, in the trans-Himalayas, Guru Padmasambhava first performed the Cham at the Samye Monastery, which he founded in Tibet.

Q7. From **Tshering Choden** to everyone: 4:19 PM

Since the youths now don't pay much attention to beautiful Buddhist dances and traditions, what are your methods and ideas to make the youth pay interest in our traditions so that we our tradition can pass on on to the younger generation.

Benoy Behl: The important thing is to convey to the young people the value and beauty of these traditions in their own life. When they realize how beneficial this knowledge and traditions are to themselves, they will accept them and continue them for the future. Therefore, the living truth and the beauty of these traditions must be presented before the young people. These traditions should be shown in the right perspective with true knowledge and with experiential joy. That is where the role of deep teachers or gurus comes in.

Q8. From **Jigme Tshewang** to everyone: 4:22 PM

As an art historian, how would you archive this Art of Cham or promote it?
(Sherubtse College)

Benoy Behl: It is a living tradition and its best preservation and promotion is in creating true knowledge about it. Just preserving sets of Cham masks or elaborate costumes will make it a tradition of the past. Its true knowledge and its relevance in one's own life must be shared with the people and in the institutions of education and culture. It has to be retained in the lives of the people as a vibrant and living part of their existence.

Therefore, the emphasis has to be on having presentations of the Cham, with the giving of the true perspective and knowledge about it.

Q9. From Tshering Lhaden to everyone: 4:24 PM

It is said that Buddhism was first born in India, but we don't see the Cham or the mask dances popular in India and what could be the reasons that chasm are not popular in India?

Benoy Behl: The Cham dance is a practice specific to Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, which is prevalent across the Northern mountainous region of India. This includes Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur in the state of Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. The Cham dance is commonly practiced in this region and I have had the pleasure of documenting it myself.

Q10. From **The Royal Academy** to everyone: 4:18 PM

How much potential does the sacred Buddhist dance has in order to preserve at the same time promote our culture? Can this field be a reminder for the younger generation to know who they are and where they come from?

(Sumitra Limbu- Grade 12)

Benoy Behl: Yes, the knowledge and the practice of the Cham can be a very important, in fact key factor in keeping alive the cultural and spiritual memory of the people. It is such practices which bring together society in a celebration of what is true and beautiful in life. With this cultural knowledge becoming less in the world everywhere today, the people and the youth of Bhutan can play a very key role in the preservation and revival of cultural and spiritual knowledge of the world.

Q 11. From **Sonam Tshewang** to everyone: 4:35 PM

Why did Guru Rinpoche say that he will be always present above the head of everyone who has faith in him. Is it just for consoling us that he has not left.

Benoy Behl: Guru Padmasambhava is an embodiment of true knowledge and wisdom, as well as compassion. He is and will always remain in the lives of all people who seek knowledge and a compassionate view of life. He will always remain above your head, granting you knowledge and protection.

Q12. From **Tshering Yangki** to everyone: 4:35 PM

Want to ask if there are some comparative understanding of this Buddhist sacred dance and the invocation and possession by deities in Buddhism.

(College of Language and Culture Studies)

Benoy Behl: This spiritual search is all about the awakening of the deities, or the finest qualities which are within ourselves. This is addressed in different ways by different practices. The important thing to remember is that we are finally always referring to the aspects and qualities of Buddhahood, which lie dormant within us. Various ways and paths are found to help us to awaken these finest of qualities which are in fact always within us.
