

Encyclopedia of Women in World Religions: Faith and Culture across History

The Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara (Dance of Tara) is a meditative movement and dance practice for women in honor of the Goddess Tara. The dance was the inspiration of Prema Dasara, a trained classical Indian Odissi dancer, who introduced the dance in 1986 and established over 90 circles for its practice around the world. Prema is the founder and spiritual and creative director of Tara Dhatu, a nonprofit organization dedicated to awakening humanity through the sacred arts.

The main purpose of the Mandala Dance of Tara is to encourage each participant to manifest her or his enlightened potential. Engaging in the dance can produce a powerful experience of meditative absorption. Esteemed lamas have declared this dance to be an accumulation of wisdom, compassion, and merit, all necessary on the path to awakening.

The dance is based on a Tibetan sadhana, a mind treasure revealed by Chokjur Lingpa, devoted to Goddess Tara. Prema Dasara explains that while translating the 21 Praises of Tara into English, she was spontaneously moved to dance to the verses and was prompted to develop the Dance of Tara in collaboration with another dancer, Lauryn Galindo (Dasara 2010, 5–9).

Prema first performed the dance with friends on Maui, where she lives. When word of it spread, she was invited to travel throughout the world and teach the dance to communities of women. Although the dance is primarily a dance of empowerment for women of all ages and abilities, men are invited to participate in supportive roles as protectors.

Goddess Tara is revered in Tibetan Buddhism as Mother of Perfected Wisdom and Great Mother of Liberation. She is the Ultimate Mother who uses her omni- science and divine powers to awaken inherent wisdom and compassion in practitioners to realize their true nature. Legends circulating in India and Tibet tell of the many lifetimes in which Tara ascended to her role as Savioreess and Enlightener.

In one much-told tale, Tara was born from the tears of Avalokitesvara as a bodhisattva, one who has vowed to hold back from enlightenment and continue to serve until every being is liberated. Another account tells how, in a former life in an age long past, Tara vowed to be reborn as a woman throughout her spiritual journey as aspirant and Divine Liberator.

A group of 21 Taras is widely worshipped in Tibetan Buddhism and is a popular object of artistic and literary treatment. A lengthy prayer devoted to the 21 forms, known as the 21 Praises of Tara, provides the theme and pattern of the Tara Dance, in which each woman embodies one of the forms of Tara. Prema has modernized and refined the invocations and language of the prayers that accompany the dance to enhance their meaning and impact.

The Dance of Tara is what is known in Tibetan Buddhism as a terma (hidden treasure), a sacred teaching revealed at a specific historical moment to an individual who is sensitive enough to receive it and sufficiently skilled to transmit it for the benefit of his or her generation and the world. The person who receives a terma, often in the form of a vision or a dream, is vested thereby with authority to introduce a new practice or teaching. Many teachings passed down for generations originated as termas. Prema's story resembles those of women in ancient India who

received revelations of sacred dances and practices, adorned themselves in colorful costumes, and offered the dances as inspiration within temples and charnel meeting grounds.

The Tara Dance has been performed in the presence of eminent Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama, who have encouraged Prema Dasara to continue the dance, teach it to others, and protect its lineage. The Dance of Tara begins with the dancers invoking Tara within a crescent moon mandala. After calling on Tara to be present and share her blessings, the dancers walk in a spiraling pattern that forms a set of concentric circles. As the dance proceeds, they move through profound geometric shapes, such as the peace symbol.

Following the spiral formation, each dancer progresses to the point of being “birthed” out of the spiral to dance her praise. As the dancers move through their self-choreographed ritual, they undergo mental, emotional, and spiritual transformation and an expansion of consciousness. Dancers lose their identification with their smaller, or everyday, self and reveal their inner nature as Goddess Tara. The body moves, and Tara appears through their expressive dance.

The dance is rooted in the practice of Tantric Buddhism, which includes all the senses of the body revealed as divine. During formal offerings of the dance, colorful costumes, such as saris, are worn. Diverse Dancing Tara groups around the world have designed a range of elegant costumes. Each of the Taras appear in sacred colors with symbolic meanings. These correspond to the qualities of the forms of Tara to which the dancer is assigned and help to embody the quality. For instance, reds are for magnetizing black symbolizes wrath, the force needed to accomplish enlightened activities yellow is for increasing and white is pacifying.

The dance symbolically enacts and represents the journey of awakening. The 21 Praises of Tara can be correlated with 21 “knots” in the subtle energy system of the body. Saying the mantras and doing the dances begins to untie the knots. The dance unfolds in the traditional order of a complete sadhana, or spiritual practice, which starts with invocation, motivation, refuge, and bodhisattva vows. It then goes into the main body of the practice—dancing of praises, meditations with mantra. It proceeds through a confirmation of the benefits of the dance and a dissolution practice (all is empty).

The dancers arise again as the deity and the merits of the practice are dedicated to the benefit of all beings. The dance is believed to bring blessings to those who dance and witness it, and to manifest the presence of Tara and spread her inspiring, empowering, and enlightening influence.

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Further Reading:

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