



Rituals & Sacred Arts

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Summary: At Dzongkar Choede ritual is not performance and the sacred arts are not decoration: both are disciplines in which a philosophical position is carried out with the body. At the end of each Tibetan year the monastery performs its own masked dance, the Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony, instituted six centuries ago after a vision of Vajrabhairava in the form of a yak. Sand mandalas are built grain by grain through metal funnels, then swept inward to the centre and returned to running water. In the tantric chant of this tradition a single voice sounds a chord. Butter sculptures are made in the knowledge that they will melt, and the monastery's incense is produced and sold as a working trade.

Tags:

CHAM

SACRED ART & RITUAL

SEVEN PILLARS

Read the original page at: <https://dzongplum.netlify.app/en/seven-pillars/rituals>



Every gesture, every sounded note, every line drawn in coloured sand encodes

something the

[curriculum](/en/seven-pillars/study) argues about in words. Practising these arts is how that understanding is joined to physical and sensory experience. What they demand is unhurried presence, which is most of the point.

What the Cham Dance Really Is

Once a year, at the end of the twelfth Tibetan month, the monastery performs the **Gyutor Yak-Zang ceremony**: a masked ritual dance with a **torma** offering that closes the old year by clearing it.

It is not a general Tibetan form that this monastery happens to perform, and it is not a spectacle. It is Dzongkar Choede's own dance, instituted six centuries ago by **Lachen Chöpal Zangpo** after his meditational deity Vajrabhairava appeared to him in the form of a yak — and at the centre of the ceremony, in front of everyone watching, an oversized yak still becomes the deity.

Monks train for it from about thirteen, and for years they train in ordinary robes. What they are learning in that time is not choreography.

[Read about the Cham dance](/en/seven-pillars/rituals/cham-dance) — the ceremony, the vision behind it, and what the dance is for.

The Architecture of Impermanence

The Tibetan name for a sand mandala is **dul-tson-kyil-khor** — mandala of coloured powders.

Building one takes days or weeks, laying sand through metal funnels called **chak-pur**, drawn across a ridged surface so that the vibration releases a few grains at a time.

The sand is not where it begins. The ground is consecrated first, with chant and dance, before a single grain is placed. When the pattern is finished it is consecrated again, with mantra and blessing, and becomes an offering.

Then it is destroyed — and the destruction is structured as carefully as the making. The sand is swept **inward, to the centre**, undoing every distinction the pattern made, until it is a single grey pile. That is carried to running water and poured in, so that the blessing

travels outward.

The dissolution is not an epilogue to the work. It is part of the work, and the direction of the

sweeping is the teaching — the same lesson the

[Middle Way](/en/seven-pillars/study/madhyamaka) classes spend four years

arguing about, done with the hands in an afternoon.

Sacred Sound

In the tantric chant of this tradition, a single monk sounds a note so low that its overtones

separate and become audible in their own right. One throat produces a chord. A listener hears two

itches, sometimes three, and only one person is singing.

The two Gelug tantric colleges, **Gyume** and **Gyuto**, are the great homes of this style — and they diverged. Until the sixteenth century both used what is called the

mountain-cracking voice. Gyume kept it. Gyuto developed the *ocean-rolling* voice.

Two colleges of one school, two ways of making the sound, both carried forward rather than

reconciled.

Around the chant sits the ritual orchestra.

dungchen

The long telescopic horn of copper and brass. Its sound is compared to the trumpeting of an elephant.

gyaling

A double-reed oboe. The name means “Indian trumpet”.

kangling

A short horn, historically made of thighbone.

dungkar

The conch shell, sounded to call the assembly.

silnyen

Vertical cymbals, marking the structure of the liturgy.

drilbu

The handbell, held with the vajra — wisdom paired with method.

Together they coordinate the breath and attention of the whole assembly into one shared rhythm —
which is the practical function underneath the sound. A hall of three hundred monks arrives at a
single pace.

Butter Sculpture

Alongside the ceremonies run the arts of the workshop. The monastery has taught thangka painting, in which pigment is ground by hand and figures are laid out to proportions fixed by canon rather
than by the painter's eye.

Butter sculpture is among the most demanding of these arts, and among the most conspicuously
temporary. Coloured butter is worked by hand into ornaments, figures and offerings of real intricacy — and the monks who make them work in the cold, because the material softens
under warm hands as they go.

Dzongkar Choede makes a great deal of it, and makes it well. Everything produced this way is made
in the knowledge that it will not last: the skill is considerable, the result is beautiful, and
nobody expects to keep it. It carries the same lesson as the mandala, in a medium that argues the
point by melting.

A fuller account of the monastery's butter sculpture, and photographs of it, are being prepared.

Incense-Making

The monastery's incense-making is a working operation rather than a craft class. Ingredients are
ground, blended and rolled; the incense is produced at volume and sold to customers outside the
monastery.

It supports the community and gives young Tibetans a trade — one of the practical foundations
that allow the study, prayer and ritual here to continue, in the same way the

[clinic](/en/community/healthcare-center) and the kitchen do.

Details of the incense the monastery produces, and how it can be obtained, are being prepared.

An Invitation to Witness

We invite visitors not as consumers of an exotic performance, but into a shared space of slowness, silence and attention.

To witness a ritual here is to step outside the pace of the ordinary world for a few hours, and

to find a tradition that is entirely alive — not preserved, but
[in use](/en/about/today).