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Mystical Monks
Sand painting, dance, music to create peace-full week at ETSU

While we imagine monks working in silence and solitude over their manuscripts and meditation on a distant mountaintop, monks of Drepung Loseling monastery in India have been traveling the world performing their traditional music and masked dances and sharing their intricate mandala sand painting skills since 1988.

They leave their confines and lifelong devotional efforts to “represent their monastery and share their cultural traditions on the tour, hoping that they will be able to make some small contribution toward world peace,” their website says. Each 15-month Mystical Arts of Tibet tour takes a select group of nine or 10 monks to more than 100 cities in the U.S. and other countries.

The Mystical Arts of Tibet tour will reach Johnson City on Nov. 10 and begin with four days of mandala sand painting in ETSU’s Reece Museum from noon Monday, Nov. 10, until a closing ceremony Thursday, Nov. 13, at 5 p.m. Each day, other than Monday that starts later, the monks’ painting process – using multi-colored sand and a slender metal funnel – will be open to public viewing and the monks available for questions, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Then on Friday, Nov. 14, the monks will conclude their residency at ETSU with the spectacle of extravagant costumes, ancient traditional dance and multiphonic chant in Sacred Music Sacred Dance in Martha Street Culp Auditorium at 7:30 p.m. The Washington Post calls the performance “… a universal expression of the human subconscious … It transports you.”

“This is a group that I’ve wanted to bring to our community because we have an interest in not only celebrating our regional culture by hosting events like The Devault Tavern Exhibition, but we also like to bring other cultures to the area for our community to experience as well,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of event sponsor Mary B. Martin School of the Arts.

Healing and peace are at the center of the traditions and monastic culture of these Tibetan monks, who have been exiled to India. “Following the legacy of Drepung Loseling Monastery, India, and with the patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Drepung Loseling is dedicated to the study and preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of wisdom and compassion …” says drepung.org website, “which today leads a fragile existence in the exiled refugee communities in India and Nepal.”

A mandala, which in Sanskrit means “sacred cosmogram,” is composed of geometric shapes and ancient spiritual symbols and used to “re-consecrate the earth.” On the first day of this weeklong
residency, the lamas draw an outline of the mandala on a wooden platform. The following days see the laying of the colored sands, poured from traditional funnels called chak-purs. Mandalas are deconstructed shortly after their completion as a metaphor of the impermanence of life, says mysticalartsoftibet.org.

The sands are swept up and to fulfill the function of healing, half is distributed to the audience at the mandala closing ceremony, while the remainder is carried to a nearby body of water, where it is deposited, to spread throughout the world for planetary healing.

“We are trying to make the spirit of water – or ‘Naga’ in Sanskrit – happy. It’s a kind of cycle of life,” said Lobsang Norbu, who is an Acharya, a master in Sanskrit and tour spokesman, in an interview with Outlook Tibet. “And through that, we can bring peace and harmony into the world at large.”

The creek running between ETSU’s D.P. Culp University Center and Sherrod Library will provide this tributary.

“We are at a time when there are a lot of struggles throughout the world,” DeAngelis says. “I see the mandala closing ceremony as something that is very timely and something that should be very powerful for us to experience.”

To conclude the monks’ visit, the Sacred Music Sacred Dance performance comprises selections believed to generate energies conducive to world healing. Robed in lavish, brocade costumes and playing traditional Tibetan instruments, the Loseling monks perform ancient temple music and dance for world healing. Dances will include the Dance of the Black Hat Masters, a demonstration of the tradition of Tibetan monastic inquiry, and the Dance of the Celestial Travelers in which five dancers represent the five elements and five wisdoms and bring the creative energy that inspires harmony and peace.

Each piece of the Mystical Arts of Tibet performance was born centuries ago from a mystical visionary experience of a great saint or sage, the website says, and has been passed down from generation to generation in oral legacy. Musical pieces – such as the instrumental and vocal Invocation of the Forces of Goodness and A Melody to Sever the Ego Syndrome – will alternate with dance.

The Drepung Loseling monks are particularly renowned for their multiphonic chanting in which each of the main chantmasters simultaneously intones three notes, thus each individually creating a complete chord. The Tibetans are the only culture on earth that cultivates this most extraordinary vocal ability, also known as “overtone singing.”

Author Dr. Huston Smith, documenting this Tibetan phenomenon in his film The Mystic’s Journey: Requiem for a Faith, referred to multiphonic chanting as “lifting the human spirit to the level of the gods.”

“I was totally moved and felt transported to a peaceful place,” said an audience member from Washington, D.C. “For the first time since Sept. 11, I can see peace ... healing is beginning for
On previous tours the monks have shared the stage with artists such as Philip Glass, Paul Simon, Sheryl Crow, Patti Smith, the Grateful Dead’s Mickey Hart and the Beastie Boys. The Mystical Arts of Tibet tour is co-produced by Richard Gere Productions and Drepung Loseling Institute, the North American seat of Drepung Loseling Monastery, India. Endorsed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Tickets for the Mystical Arts of Tibet Sacred Music Sacred Dance performance are $5 students of all ages, $15 senior 60+ and $20 general admission.

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