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March 14, 2000

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From Lhasa to Bloomington Monks to Provide a Glimpse of Tibet Sand painting, sacred music sacred dance, and chapel blessing to highlight 3-day IWU Visit

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Tucked among the sweeping peaks of the Himalayan mountains at the "roof of the world" is an ancient, spiritual, and sacred culture that puts a premium on meditation, patience, and healing.

A peek into that culture—showcased in the Golden Globe-nominated film "Seven Years in Tibet," starring Brad Pitt—will come here this month, when Illinois Wesleyan University hosts The Mystical Arts of Tibet courtesy of the Loseling Institute and Richard Gere Productions.

Three-Day Program

The three-day event will feature construction of a mandala, a colorful sand painting that monks will assemble in the Dug Out rotunda of IWU's Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University. The monks will work about six-hours a day, March 22-24. The public is invited, free-of-charge, to observe the mandala construction process. The mandala, painstakingly designed and constructed almost sand grain by sand grain, will be destroyed, when a procession of monks carries the sand to a "flowing body of water" to disperse its healing energies throughout the world. Sand-painted mandalas are used as tools for reconsecrating the earth and its inhabitants.

The Tibetan monks will begin their IWU visit with a Chapel presentation, where they will deliver a blessing, chant, and briefly speak on the significance of the sand mandala. Subsequently, they will process to the Memorial Student Center, where they will bless the Dug Out rotunda. The Chapel program is at 11 a.m., March 22, in Evelyn Chapel, 1301 N. Park St. It is open to the public with no admission fee.

The 10 Tibetan lamas will culminate their IWU visit with a performance of Sacred Music Sacred Dance on March 24 at 7:30 p.m. in Westbrook Auditorium, Presser Hall (IWU's School of Music), 303 E. University Ave. This event is sponsored by several IWU groups: Sigma Tau Delta, the English honors society; Committee for Religious Life; President's Office; IWU's Chaplain's Office; and the Mellon Center for Teaching Excellence. It also is open to the public, free-of-charge.

Tibetan Music: From Hollywood to the Olympics

Tibetan temple music and dance have attracted large audiences in North America due, in part, to tours of the Drepung Loseling monks. The Mystical Arts of Tibet tours are endorsed by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, who was exiled from his country after China's suppression of a Tibetan national uprising in 1959. The leader of a democratically based alternative Tibetan government, the Dalai Lama was awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize for his commitment to the nonviolent liberation of his homeland.

The Drepung Loseling monks are featured on the Golden Globe-nominated soundtrack of the motion picture, "Seven Years in Tibet," starring Brad Pitt.

The monks performed with Phillip Glass in the live premiere presentation of his Academy Award-nominated music and score to the Martin Scorsese film, "Kundun."

Two of the CDs by the Loseling multiphonic singers—"Sacred Tibetan Temple Music" and "Sacred Music Sacred Dance"—achieved a top 10 listing on U.S. music charts. The CDs will be on sale during the mandala construction.

Tibetan multiphonic chanting was a key part of the opening ceremony music, composed by Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, at the 1996 Centennial Olympics in Atlanta.

On previous tours, the Drepung Loseling monks have shared the stage with the likes of Paul Simon, Natalie Merchant, and the Beastie Boys.

Tour Goals, Tibetan Politics

The Mystical Arts of Tibet tour has three key purposes: to make a contribution to world healing and peace movements, to generate greater awareness of the endangered Tibetan civilization, and to raise support for the Tibetan refugee community in India.

The U.S. State Department reported in 1997 that about 125,000 Tibetan refugees and their descendents live in India and Nepal with a few thousand others scattered among various other nations. There are about 1,000 Tibetan refugees living in the United States. More than 2 million ethnic Tibetans live in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China and perhaps another 2-3 million Tibetans live in other parts of the PRC.

"For the Tibetans who live in Tibet, the last 50 years have been tumultuous," Jeffrey A. Bader, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1997.

"Chinese inroads into the traditional Tibetan way of life," Bader explained, "touched off violent opposition by the late 1950s, leading the Dalai Lama to flee to India in 1959. Guerrilla warfare continued in some areas for a few years, but was effectively suppressed.

"Thousands of monasteries were closed or destroyed," Bader added. "Tibet suffered irreparable cultural damage, and Buddhism came under attack as a feudal relic.

"The human rights situation in Tibet," Bader concluded, "is highly unsatisfactory."

The Mandala

The subject of a Tibetan sand painting is known in Sanskrit as a mandala, or cosmogram, of which there are many types. They include geometric shapes and ancient spiritual symbols.

In general, all mandalas have outer, inner, and secret meanings.

On the outer level, they represent the world in its divine form. On the inner level, they represent a map by which the ordinary human mind is transformed into enlightened mind. And, on the secret level, they depict the primordial perfect balance of the subtle energies of the body and the clear light dimension of the mind.

"The creation of a sand painting," according to the Drepung Loseling Monastery, "is said to effect a purification and healing on these three levels."

Various mandalas can symbolize different spiritual approaches. For example, one type of mandala can symbolize compassion as the core of spiritual experience, another can focus on wisdom, and a still another can symbolize the need for courage and strength in the quest for sacred knowledge. There are hundreds of mandalas associated with deities in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, including the healing Buddha, the Buddha of boundless life, the opponent of death, and the Buddha of compassion.

Mandalas have their roots in the legacy of Buddhist India, extending back some 15,000-20,000 years to the time preceding the migration of native North Americans from Central Asia. Therefore, there are similarities between it and the sand-painting traditions of the natives of the Southwest United States, such as the Hopi and the Navajo.

On previous tours, the lamas of the Drepung Loseling Monastery have constructed sand paintings at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, CNN's headquarters in Atlanta, Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, the San Francisco Science Museum, Seattle's International Children's Festival, and elsewhere.

Mandala Construction

There are a half-dozen steps in constructing a mandala, beginning with an opening ceremony, where monks consecrate the site with about 30 minutes of chants, music, and recitations.

Immediately after the opening ceremony the monks draw the mandala's line design, a process that takes about 3 hours.

The mandala is constructed over several days with the monks pouring millions of sand grains from traditional metal funnels called chak-pur. The finished mandala measures approximately 5-feet by 5-feet.

When the mandala is completed, it is consecrated by the monks. In some places, several thousand guests have attended the colorful closing ceremony.

During the closing ceremony, the monks dismantle the mandala, sweeping up the colored sands to symbolize the impermanence of all that exists. Half of the sand may be distributed to the audience.

The mandala process concludes with the dispersal of the sand, where sand is carried in a procession by the monks, accompanied by guests, to a flowing body of water, where it is ceremonially poured to disperse the healing energies of the mandala throughout the world.

Sacred Music Sacred Dance

Ancient societies throughout the world have believed that ritual performance of sacred music and dance at special times establishes communication with higher powers of good and brings about healing on the personal, social, and environmental levels. In Tibet, whenever a monastery marked a spiritual festival, people from surrounding villages and nomadic tribes would assemble in the monastery's courtyard for three or four days of sacred music and dance. The Sacred Music Sacred Dance performance of the Tibetan monks at IWU will follow in that tradition.

The music is particularly renowned for its two forms of multiphonic singing: low tone and high tone. In both forms, each of the main chantmasters simultaneously intones three notes, thus each individually creating a complete chord. This tradition also is known as "overtone singing" because it is accomplished by means of learning to control the muscles of the vocal cavity and reshaping it while singing to make it accord with the natural overtones of the voice.

The two-part sacred music sacred dance performance, comprised of 11 selections, runs for 100 minutes with a 20-minute intermission. Various segments are titled: Invocation of the Forces of Goodness, Purifying the Universe, A Melody to Sever the Ego Syndrome, Purifying the Environment and Its Inhabitants, Dance of the Celestial Travelers, and Incense Offering and Auspicious Song for World Peace.

The intent of these various selections varies. A Melody to Sever the Ego Syndrome, for example, aims at releasing the mind from the "ego-clinging habit." In the Dance of the Celestial Travelers, five dancers—symbolizing the five elements and five wisdoms—come from another world to visit ours in times of stress and danger, bringing creative energy that inspires harmony and peace.

Tibet

Tibet occupies about 471,000 square miles of the plateaus and mountains of Central Asia, including the world's tallest peak, Mt. Everest. It is bordered by three Chinese provinces—

Tsinghai, Szechwan, and Yunnan—as well as Myanmar (Burma), India, Bhutan, and Nepal.

Before the 1950s Tibet sought isolation from the rest of the world. It was unified culturally and religiously through the Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhism.

After Tibet was incorporated into China in the 1950s, fitful efforts at economic development took place, which were disrupted by ethnic tensions between the Chinese and the Tibetans, who resisted imposition of Marxist values.

Tibet had functioned as an independent government until 1951 and defended its frontier against China in occasional fighting as late as 1931. In 1949, however, the "liberation" of Tibet was heralded, and in October, 1950, the Chinese invaded eastern Tibet, overwhelming the poorly equipped Tibetan troops.

An appeal by the Dalai Lama to the United Nations was denied, and support from India and Britain was not forthcoming. A Tibetan delegation summoned to China in 1951 had to sign a treaty dictated by the conquerors. It professed to guarantee Tibetan autonomy and religion but also allowed the establishment at Lhasa, Tibet's capital, of Chinese civil and military headquarters.

Smoldering resentment at the strain on the country's resources from the influx of Chinese troops and civilians heated up in 1956 with reports of fierce fighting and oppression in certain areas. Refugees carried on guerrilla warfare against the Chinese in Central Tibet, which exploded into a popular uprising at Lhasa in March, 1959. The Dalai Lama and many of his ministers and followers escaped and the rebellion was quashed.

Chinese control of Tibet was loosened and then tightened in Tibet as a result of the Cultural Revolution. Between 1963 and 1971 no foreign visitors were allowed to enter Tibet. China made economic investments in Tibet in the early 1980s and tried to repair diplomatic rifts with the Dalai Lama. However, riots broke out in Tibet in the late 1980s and China imposed martial law.

China's suppression of political and religious freedoms has led to Western criticism and protests by human-rights organizations.

"The Chinese Communist invasion of [Tibet] in the 1950s, the wholesale destruction of [Tibetan] heritage there, and the genocidal Chinese policies that have ensued during the Chinese colonization of Tibet," according to a Drepung Loseling Monastery paper, "means that now the Tibetans live a fragile existence in the refugee camps of India. Our generation could be the last to see their artistic culture in its full richness, integrity, and splendor."

Background on Tour Sponsors

The monks are from the Drepung Loseling Monastery, which was the largest monastery in Tibet, with approximately 10,000 monks. In 1959 the monks became refugees in India following an invasion by Communist Chinese troops.

In 1991 friends of Drepung Loseling established a headquarters for the monastery in North America in Atlanta, Ga., which is affiliated with Emory University.

Richard Gere Productions, another tour sponsor, is named for the Tibetan activist and actor, who has starred in films such as "An Officer and a Gentleman" (1982), "Pretty Woman" (1990), "The Jackal" (1997), and "Runaway Bride" (1999).

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,070 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$23 million library and a \$6 million student center are under construction.

Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine ranks Illinois Wesleyan University 12th among the nation's top 1,600 private colleges in providing a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Also sharing IWU's rank are Princeton and Dartmouth.

Editor's Note: All IWU events involving the Tibetan monks are open for news-media coverage. The monks will be constructing the mandala for about 6 hours daily, March 22-24, in the Nell Eckley Lounge of IWU's Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University. For a more precise schedule—including the time for the opening and closing mandala ceremonies, call IWU Office of University Communications, 309/556-3181.