

## **Trance Dance**

by Esther Lohneis

*article on Nepali Shamanic Dance w/ Bhola Nath Banstola 10 Sept. 08*

For the week leading up to this dance ceremony, I had a growing sense of unquiet within, which grew steadily. There were also physical symptoms in and around my throat; a lump building, like something was stuck there and an aching neck. My anxiety grew, as I have had similar experiences in the run up to other shamanic workshops, and from these knew that I was preparing somehow for a major release – the next layer of outdated perceptions and behaviours to be let go of, in this case stuff held in my throat.

I knew it would be good for me in the grand scheme of things and I was a willing participant, I was just feeling the fear which seems to be an inevitable part of these healing experiences for me; I would be growing into the great unknown of myself, taking another step forward into ...who knows what: wholeness, the light, my dreams (?) Whatever was waiting for me, an old part of myself would have to die to make room for it, and I was afraid.

Bhola however, who was my house-guest for a few days preceding the ceremony, seemed to have no such qualms, and was unfailingly cheerful and down-to-earth, pitching in with the washing-up, cooking and shopping, while also sparing time to play jolly games with my 4 year old daughter. An ideal visitor then, a seemingly 'ordinary' man. Except. Except after spending only a very short time with him, it was obvious how well-educated he was, how much of a grasp he had on world affairs and most of all, how extraordinarily accurate his perceptions of others were; of both their issues and their strengths. Still ordinary though for all that, still a 'usual' person.

Except. Except it was then that I began to see his face change. It happened a few times, we would be sitting, chatting, and gently, almost nonchalantly, another face would begin to merge out of his, morphing into someone who breathed strength, who was big; at least 3 times bigger than he in the physical body, bald, with a long drooping moustache and huge wide arms. And then as

quickly as this other had emerged, he would submerge again, and Bhola would be there once again before me, usually laughing about some story he was telling, and I would shake out of my vision, and laugh right along with him, secretly wondering about what I had seen.

So the day of the dance ceremony arrived, and my nervous anxiety left to be replaced by the giddiness and excitement of a teenager. We arrived at the Town Hall, into the main hall, which is a beautiful space to have any kind of dance, with its high ceilings and polished wooden floor, and were greeted by our hosts (and renowned shamans in their own right) from the Isle of Avalon Foundation, Howard and Elsa Malpas. With their assistance, Bhola quickly set up the room and soon at least 25 people were sitting in circle.

Bhola sat on a cushion on the floor, in his white ceremonial dress, and spoke a bit about the Nepali shamanic tradition. In the centre were different coloured cloths, each neatly placed to signify the four directions, with the central cloth being white and representing ether, that is us – human beings, in whom it all comes together: the physical embodiment of the four elements. In front of Bhola he also had an array of different objects like a string of bells, a double-sided drum, a bag for ‘offerings’, and different headdresses.

He went through each item, explaining each one’s significance before putting it on, ending with a headdress made of peacock feathers, which he said meant wisdom in his lineage. As he finished tying it around his head, I was astounded; I had entered the room with a friend, an ‘ordinary’ man, short in stature, long in compassion, and yet with each item he had put on, another layer of power seemed to have been added, until with that final knot in his headdress, I saw him transformed before me into a true shaman: the man of power I had fleetingly seen him change into days before. The ceremony was about to begin.

Firstly, as some members of the circle drummed and rattled up some energy, each of us set our intention for the ceremony, by taking a flower, moving anti-clockwise around the centre and in our own ways, asking for blockages to be removed about whichever issue we wanted to focus on.

We then placed the flower onto the white cloth in the centre of the four directions. While this was going on, Bhola was circling the four directions, while singing, drumming and spinning around. An image of whirling dervishes passed through my mind. I could feel power building; an immensity inside myself. As the lights were dimmed I merged into the shadows, dancing, shouting, whirling into my own dervishness. I began to vomit. Luckily for everyone concerned, nothing physical came out of my mouth, but in all other ways it was like throwing up. I felt my throat constricting, then emptying, over and over.

How long it went on for, I have no idea, I only became aware of the group quietening, then reversing our direction to clockwise, to fill up the empty spaces we had created inside, with positive energy, a new bridge to help us step into new parts of ourselves, into brighter futures. I began to experience a floating sensation of utter and total inner peace. And before I knew it, we were finishing, stepping back into our places in the circle. Comments and questions were invited, and to close the circle, each one of us received a multi-coloured thread to link us to the work we had done that evening, to each other, to Spirit, to who knows what: forgive me but understandably my memory of that part of the evening is slightly foggy.

Shamanism, or any healing for that matter, is only useful in as much as it is directly relevant to our lives now. Directly after the ceremony I came home and cried a lot, which felt needed. In the few weeks since, I have had a change in perception directly related to my intention that evening. This has helped me to initiate changes in my life which will, hopefully, bring me the different results I wish for.

And Bhola? The layers of power fell off him, and he reverted back to the person I had first got to know, soon packing up and continuing his travels to bring healing to others. It strikes me that he is an updated and alive version of the ancient shaman for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the shamans of old lived outside their villages, kind of belonging but not really. Bhola travels around the world bringing healing to us, members of the global village, kind of belonging but not really.

For me Bhola's legacy has been a lasting impression of a real shaman; a man of humility, generosity, wisdom, and most of all great humour, who is not afraid to pitch in with everyday chores. He also gives most of the money he makes to help support an orphanage in Kathmandu, therefore enabling hundreds of children to live better and more hopeful lives. Like all great teachers, his legacy is one of a living example of what is possible in our world, what one man can achieve through living his true purpose. Thank you Bhola.

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