Happily and spontaneously, the Golden Fish (*sernga*) swim unobstructed through murky waters. They symbolize humankind’s ability to take correct actions in a challenging world.

(Below) Masked dancers wear elaborate costumes and heavy, carved wooden masks that are colorfully painted and richly decorated. Costumes and masks contribute to the complex symbolism of the dances. Photo copyright Michael Tobias

Bhutanese masked dances, among the country’s most remarkable traditions, incorporate many rituals and symbols of life—its meaning and mystery. The dances are not entertainment, even though they are communal and celebratory.

There are many different masked dances in Bhutan, but virtually all dramatize moral lessons, purify and protect places from demonic spirits, promote Buddhist teachings, or commemorate the life of Guru Rinpoche. The dancers wear spectacular and colorful costumes, and most masks are wooden and very heavy. Dancers bind their heads with cloth strips to protect them from the weight of the masks and to keep the masks in place during long, energetic dances. Masks represent different animals, wrathful or beneficent deities, skulls, manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, and ordinary people.

(Top) Bhutanese masked-dance festivals often dramatize well-known Himalayan legends and folktales. Humor also plays an important part in many performances. Photo by Andrew Connors