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# Buddhism as Performing Art

## Visualizing Music in the Tibetan Sacred Ritual Music Liturgies

Jeffrey W. Cupchik

*If the perfection of generosity  
Were the alleviation of the world's poverty,  
Then since beings are still starving now,  
In what manner did the previous Buddhas perfect it?*

*The perfection of generosity is said to be  
The thought to give all beings everything,  
Together with the fruit of such a thought;  
Hence it is simply a state of mind.<sup>1</sup>*

—Shantideva, eighth-century Buddhist philosopher, Nalanda Monastic University, India

### Introduction: *Chöd* Studies—an Interdisciplinary Approach

The last three decades have signaled a gradual increase in the amount of Western scholarship produced exclusively on *Chöd* (Tib. *gCod*)<sup>2</sup>; however, the meditation practice has thus far captured the interest of Buddhist studies scholars much more than ethnomusicologists or musicologists. Western scholars of religion have studied *Chöd* from numerous perspectives, including historiography of lineage,<sup>3</sup> *Chöd* theory and doctrine,<sup>4</sup> goals of the practice,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shantideva, Chapter 5, “Guarding Alertness,” verses 9–10, in *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, trans. Stephan Batchelor (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979), 40.

<sup>2</sup> The Wylie system of Tibetan transliteration is utilized throughout this article—with one exception. The name of the ritual discussed here is spelled two different ways in the academic literature: *gCod* (the transliteration according to Wylie) and the more easily pronounceable romanized phoneticization “*Chöd*,” with the “d” being silent. In the interest of readability, I have maintained the latter rendering throughout. Where a Sanskrit term and a Tibetan term are given, because of common usage, Sanskrit comes first, with the respective abbreviations “Skt.” and “Tib.”

<sup>3</sup> See Janet Gyatso, “The Development of the Gcod Tradition,” in Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds., *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 320–41.

hagiography,<sup>6</sup> and a combination of all the above.<sup>7</sup> Yet a substantive gap has persisted with respect to research into the significance of the musical and performance aspects of *Chöd* rituals.

While investigating *Chöd* rituals and meditation practices from the interdisciplinary perspective of ethnomusicology, anthropology, religious studies, Buddhist studies, and ritual studies in order to address this gap,<sup>8</sup> I utilized several complementary research methodologies, including an apprenticeship into the study of *Chöd* liturgical song-poetry and performance practices with recognized Tibetan masters, music transcription, musical analysis, and ethnographic interviews. Primarily I undertook a multi-site ethnographic and textual study, which involved spending time researching Tibetan Buddhism, music, culture, and language, while living in or near Tibetan communities in India, Nepal, Ladakh, Tibet, Canada, and the United States over the past twenty years.

By translating liturgical song texts and transcribing the music of some of the most commonly performed *Chöd* liturgies, I developed an extensive catalogue of sonic and gestural parameters drawn from audio- and video-recorded performances of traditional masters. I found that composers of *Chöd* song-poems used several music compositional techniques—such as tone painting, melodic phrasing, sequences, and rhythmic ostinati—to create musical complements to the liturgies. My findings indicate that the melodies and rhythms in *Chöd* performance enhance the meditation process by eliciting specific emotions that aid the ritual practitioner in experiencing transformative insights into a given section of a *Chöd* ritual. These musical elements, when examined in conjunction with a myriad of other findings, weave the texture of a *Chöd* practitioner’s meditative experience of a liturgy during a performance. They furthermore highlight an aspect of *Chöd* liturgies that deserves immediate scholarly attention: that music functions as not as a secondary aesthetic gesture, a mere accompaniment to the written poetry, but in fact can be considered as a primary text—and a primary conduit for the participant’s development of specific emotional states and visualizations that can lead to meditative insights.

### **Musical Performance in *Chöd*: A Multifaceted Ritual**

From a phenomenological perspective, the *Chöd* ritual is perhaps the most multifaceted tradition of liturgical ritual music practiced and performed by Tibetan Buddhists today. The practitioner performs song-poems vocally while accompanying himself or herself on Vajrayāna ritual musical instruments: the large hourglass-shaped drum (Skt. *ḍamaru*), Tibetan bell (Tib. *dril bu*), and

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<sup>4</sup> See Carol Savvas, “A Study of the Profound Path of Gcod: The Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation Tradition of Tibet’s Great Woman Saint Machig Labdrön” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See Giacomella Orofino, “The Great Wisdom Mother and the *Gcod* Tradition,” in David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 396–416; and Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 87–92.

<sup>6</sup> See Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik’s Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd: A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See Jérôme Édou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> See Jeffrey W. Cupchik, “The Tibetan Buddhist *gCod* Ritual Meditation Practice: A Study of the Music, Liturgy, Transmission and Performance” (Ph.D. diss., York University, 2009).

thighbone trumpet or *kangling* (Tib. *rkang gling*). The practitioner must play these instruments and sing, all the while remaining attentive to the inward performance of detailed visualizations described in each syllable during an hour-long musical-meditation performance. The *Chöd* practitioner follows a ritual text or *sādhana* (“meditation manual,” Tib. *sgrub thabs*), which functions as a liturgy that is to be musically performed. The *sādhana* is at once a guide to, and a structured sequence of, mentally performed visualizations that are said to lead one to Buddhahood.<sup>9</sup> The ritual process of the *Chöd* meditation practice occurs in the rapid, moment-by-moment flow of physical and mental performance.<sup>10</sup> The successful completion of a *Chöd* ritual *sādhana* does not involve improvisation, but proper execution of the performance instructions given in the text, imparted to the initiated disciple in a formal oral transmission (Tib. *lung*) by a qualified teacher or “lama” (Skt. *guru*, Tib. *bla ma*), and then carefully explained through oral commentary.

### Utilizing Fear on the Path: Transformation in Tantric Buddhist Ritual

Within the context of a *Chöd* ritual, the practitioner cuts her attachment to the notion of “self,” enacting a concept of intersubjectivity<sup>11</sup> and compassion that is central to the essence of Buddhism by emphasizing the mutually interdependent nature of phenomena, and dissolving the egotistical framework that separates “self” and “other.” The purpose of the *Chöd* ritual is to destroy the demon of “self-grasping ignorance” by “cutting it off” (*gCod*) at its root. To do so, the *Chöd* practitioner is instructed to perform the ritual in frightening sites where spirits are said to live (cemeteries, haunted places, temple ruins, ramshackle dwellings, the meeting of two paths in a forest, etc.). The practice is also considered a personal test of her level of *bodhicitta* (Tib. *byangs chub kyi sems*), which is defined as the altruistic resolve to relieve all beings of suffering by attaining Buddhist enlightenment for their sake.

Confronted with a frightening situation, having invited harmful beings (spirits) to the place of practice using music—by singing compelling melodies, drumming in steady rhythms, and playing other “calling” instruments such as the thighbone trumpet—practitioners utilize situational fear and their instinct for self-preservation to clearly elicit the innate notion of self, a self that the adept feels must be protected from harm. The purpose of the rite is to “cut” through that notion. The self appears to exist from its own side, in an independent substantive way, yet

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<sup>9</sup> *Sādhana* may be translated as “means of achievement” and thus can refer to a method. See Daniel Cozort, “*Sādhana* (*sgrub thabs*): Means of Achievement for Deity Yoga,” in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger Jackson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996), 331–43.

<sup>10</sup> Several of the main musical features of *Chöd* ritual practice may be observed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dreGjqO2yxY>. This melody is performed by Ani Choying Drolma, a Tibetan Buddhist nun based in Nepal, who concertizes to fundraise on behalf of her nunnery. We observe her playing the bell (*dril bu*) and hourglass-shaped drum (*damaru*) while “accompanying” her voice in rhythmic time. Across various *Chöd* traditions and within a given *sādhana*, ornamented melodies as well as rhythmic patterns can vary in their complexity.

<sup>11</sup> For further elucidation, see Alan Wallace, “Intersubjectivity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8/5–7 (2001): 209–30.

upon deeper examination it is discovered to be empty and merely relational. The *Chöd* ritual is a synesthetic, performative method for realizing this philosophical truth.

During the practice, the *Chöd* practitioner visualizes sending his consciousness into space and offers the “old” body—mentally transformed into all desirable things (food, clothes, materials, etc.)—to the invited spirit guests. When a harmful spirit appears, the practitioner’s habitual tendency to protect himself is to be thwarted by realizing that there is no “self” left to protect. The mind has already been sent into space, and the body has already been given away and has been consumed by the spirits. At this point, “when fear arises, one must then thoroughly search for the self that is threatened and, at the same time, let go of the body that is threatened.”<sup>12</sup>

In the middle of this frightening scenario, a profound insight and transformation are said to occur for the most advanced practitioners, who can see themselves (mind, body, and identity) as relationally existent, and not as inherently existing beings. Thus, they will have “cut” the “root” of delusions, which is the erroneous belief in a *śāstra* truly existent substantial self. They can then altruistically give to all spirits, gods and ghosts (*Iha ‘dre*), peaceful and harmful beings alike, that which they have held most precious all their lives—the body, which they no longer identify uncritically as “I,” “me” or “mine.”

The main question this article explores is: How does the ritual music performance function in the context of the experience of fear to help bring about this profound transformation? We will turn to this question shortly, but first some historical background on the tradition is appropriate.

### ***Chöd* Philosophy, Lineage, and Transmission**

Philosophically, *Chöd* is founded on the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) Sūtras*.<sup>13</sup> Traditional historiography claims that these texts were revealed and systematized by the Indian Buddhist mahāsiddha Nāgārjuna, and later clarified by his disciple Chandrakīrti.<sup>14</sup> *Chöd* is the tantric embodiment of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*,<sup>15</sup> the longest form of which contains 100,000 lines. There are also versions of middling length at 20,000 lines, and one shorter still at 8,000 lines. In Tibet the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts were frequently recited as a form of meritmaking. Machik Labdrön (ma gcig labs sgron, 1055–1153) was a recitation specialist of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and from an early age would stay in lay benefactors’ homes. She was known for both the speed with which she read and her comprehension of the *Sūtras* that describe

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<sup>12</sup> David Molk, ed., *Chöd in the Ganden Tradition: The Oral Instructions of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2006), 59.

<sup>13</sup> A *sūtra* is a discourse given by the Buddha, or by one of his main disciples, that has been written down by the disciples. A *śāstra* is a commentarial text, usually written to explicate the meaning of a *sūtra*. Buddhist tantra, or Vajrayāna, refers to the Diamond Vehicle of esoteric texts and practices transmitted in a lineage to initiates.

<sup>14</sup> Nāgārjuna was the disciple of the “Great Brahman” Saraha, who is recognized as revitalizing tantric teachings after they had gone underground for many centuries following the Buddha Shakyamuni’s passing in the sixth century B.C.E.

<sup>15</sup> The text discusses six perfections (Skt. *pāramitās*) that are to be practiced: “generosity,” “ethical discipline,” “patience,” “perseverance,” “meditative concentration,” and “wisdom.” *Chöd* emphasizes all of these, but especially generosity and wisdom. Given the popularity of the practice across Buddhist Central Asia, it should be noted that Mongolians refer to the practice as “giving the body” or “lu jin” (Tib. *lus byin*) rather than “cutting” (*gCod*).

how to realize the essence of “wisdom,” or the “emptiness” of all phenomena.<sup>16</sup> These scriptures are embodied as “The Great Mother” or Yum Chenmo, the anthropomorphization of the wisdom realizing emptiness. The Great Mother is a central meditation deity (*yi dam*) in the *Chöd* ritual. Indeed, Machik Labdrön herself, due to her level of realization, is generally said to be an emanation of the Great Mother.<sup>17</sup>

### *Inception of the Chöd Lineage: Dohā, Gur, and Chöd*

From a historical perspective, *Chöd* stems from the Indian *dohā* tradition of Sanskrit poetry composed by mahāsiddhas. The melodies of the *Chöd* ritual fall within the *gur* (Tib. *mgur*, “songs of meditative experience”) tradition of Tibetan poetry writing and sung recitation.<sup>18</sup> *Gur* spiritual song-poetry is derived from the Sanskrit tradition of poetic literature, the Indian mystic writings of the *dohā* tradition that fostered such compositions as Saraha’s “Royal Song.”<sup>19</sup> Following *The Blue Annals*,<sup>20</sup> Herbert Guenther traces the history of the Indian tradition and lineage of *dohā* poetry and the manner in which it was taught to Tibetans.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between the liturgical song-poems of *Chöd* and *gur* concerns their respective scope and length. By performing a *Chöd sādhana*, one practices the entire path to complete enlightenment. One does so through a sequence of progressive meditations, composed as subrituals of a liturgy, each with its own melody of a particular quality and emotional tenor.

*Chöd* draws from several *gur* melodies for one liturgy, which is quite unlike the majority of song-poems in the *gur* tradition that consist of only one musical tune on a single Buddhist theme such as “impermanence” (*mi rtag pa*). Each of the *gur*-styled melodies is sung to a particular subsection of the liturgy and functions as a meditation practice that eventually completes the

<sup>16</sup> Even though the philosophical view maintained by the Buddhist Mādhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika school proponents “speaks of phenomena as being empty and having an empty nature, this is not to be misinterpreted as implying that phenomena do not exist at all. Rather, phenomena do not exist by themselves, in and of themselves, in their own right, or inherently. Because phenomena possess the characteristics of existing and are dependent on other factors—causes, conditions, and so forth—they are, therefore, devoid or empty of having an independent nature. ‘Emptiness’ is understood in terms of ‘dependent origination.’” See Bstan ‘dzin rgya mtsho (Tenzin Gyatso), *The World of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 44–45.

<sup>17</sup> Machik Labdrön is revered for her compassionate regard towards poor and neglected beings, which may be considered analogous to the enduring reverence for her near contemporary, Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226).

<sup>18</sup> Geshe Thupten Jinpa, personal communication, April 2004. Jinpa notes that the song-poems of the *Chöd* ritual stem from the *gur* genre. The Tibetan poet-saint Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*, 1052–1135) was famously recognized across Central Asia and Himalayan regions for his inspiring *gur*, spontaneously sung dharmic expositions on any aspect of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. See Thupen Jinpa and Jaś Elsner, *Songs of Spiritual Experience: Tibetan Buddhist Poems of Insight and Awakening* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000). See also Garma C. C. Chang, ed. and trans., *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Mi la ras pa* (New York: Oriental Studies Foundation, 1962), 2 vols.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, trans. and ed., *The Royal Song of Saraha: A Study in the History of Buddhist Thought* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala, 1968), 15.

<sup>20</sup> ‘gos lo tsa ba gzon nu dpal., *The Blue Annals*, ed. and trans. George N. Roerich (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1949–53), 2: 843.

<sup>21</sup> Guenther, *Royal Song of Saraha*, 15. He states that “the tradition of the *dohās* in Tibet goes back to Mar-pa (1012–97), who had studied them in India under Maitripa and who transmitted his knowledge to his favorite disciple Mi-la-ras-pa.”

ritual. Thus, stylistically, the song-poetry of *gur* and *Chöd* are similar, while structurally the *Chöd* ritual is dramaturgically more extensive than the *gur*.

The *Chöd* ritual is akin to the Catholic Mass in that it exists formally as a multisectioned liturgical ritual that leads to a climactic section, with musically appropriate settings for the liturgical text in each subritual section. Moreover, the melodies for the subrituals are not interchangeable; rather, each is part of a deliberate compositional strategy to enliven the liturgy for the worshiper at particular moments—on specific words, syllables, and key melodic phrases in certain sections within an emotional arc that is architecturally appropriate to the dramaturgical narrative and weight of particular themes—musical and dramatic—woven throughout. It is the climactic section of a widely practiced *Chöd* ritual *sādhana* to which this article attends. First, however, some further contextualization about the ritual will be helpful.

*“Outer” and “Inner” Chöd: Levels of Sādhana Practice*

Machik Labdrön taught that there are four levels of *Chöd* practice: “outer” (*phyi*), “inner” (*nang*), “secret” (*gsang*), and “suchness” (*de kho na nyid*). At the “outer” level, the *Chöd* ritual involves the practitioner engaging simultaneously in several performance tasks. One is the vocal work of chanting, singing pitched melodies, and performing mantric utterances. The practitioner is also engaged in the physical work of swinging the right arm, turning the wrist, and twisting the fingers and thumb in playing the two-sided drum, as well as the periodic diaphragmatic and oral muscular work of blowing through loosely pursed vibrating lips to play the thighbone trumpet. The practitioner must also finesse the gentle falling of the left arm and wrist to properly time the ringing of the Tibetan bell with the struck beats of the *ḍamaru*. It is altogether a highly coordinated performance event; but this is only one aspect of the outer, or external, level of *Chöd*. There are other subrituals, such as dances and gestures associated with going to the place of practice that are referred to as the “four modes of going” (*‘gro tshul rnam bzhi*), and the subritual of the “three cycles of subduing” (*zil gnon skor gsum*), which are to be performed as one approaches and arrives at the place of practice.

At the inner level, during *Chöd* practice one works toward reducing attachment to one’s body and material possessions. The aim is to increase the level of *bodhicitta* (altruistic intentionality) along with the level of realization of the mutual interdependence of all phenomena, “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Tib. *stong pa nyid*). One does this by developing greater equanimity toward all sentient beings (recognizing all as one’s mothers and fathers from former lives) and proceeding through a series of stages of augmenting one’s compassionate resolve to relieve all beings of suffering. Since *Chöd* is a practice of “highest yoga tantra” (Skt. *anuttarayogatantra*, Tib. *bla na med pa’i rgyud*), the final goal of the practice is the attainment of enlightenment in the body of this lifetime through the meditative combination of “method” (development of *bodhicitta*) and “wisdom” (the direct realization of emptiness) by transforming one’s consciousness and identity through the *Chöd* method of guru-deity yoga (*bla ma lha’i rnal ‘byor*).

To practice *Chöd*, one must have received the initiation from a qualified lama, and, as a practitioner, one must keep tantric vows and any commitments given. As a tantric practice, guru-deity yoga forms a major component of practice, with the central meditational deity seen as both the lama and as Machik, who is understood in this context to be an emanation of Yum Chenmo and visualized in the aspect of Vajrayoginī.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Chöd* Pedagogy—a Graduated Path**

When *Chöd* was taught to me during my apprenticeship with Ven. Pencho Rabgey,<sup>23</sup> it was fascinating to learn that the notion of the Buddhist path to enlightenment being “graduated” is applied in both meditational pedagogy and music pedagogy related to liturgical ritual practices. The pedagogical approach to Buddhist sacred liturgical ritual music involves the teacher imparting—in an overtly graduated manner—instructions regarding the outer musical performance (singing techniques, instrument playing techniques, and so forth) and the inner meditation performance (contemplating and analyzing the meaningful visualizations as described in the liturgical poetry).

From the outset, the pedagogical discursive strategy involves frequent mention of the distinction between “beginner” and “advanced” practitioners, thus recalling the graduated path of advancement—here, in terms of the practitioner’s performance abilities and preparedness—on both the external and internal levels. One of the most frequent thematic utterances in a Tibetan ritual teacher’s pedagogy involves referring to that which beginners can play, perform, and meditate upon in comparison to that which advanced practitioners are able (and permitted and empowered) to play, perform, and meditate upon. As well, pedagogues frequently turn to discuss comparatively the outdoor performance contexts that are safe (for beginner practitioners) to go to and potentially dangerous (for anyone other than advanced practitioners).

The basic analogy between a graduated path toward Buddhist enlightenment and differentiated levels of instruction/practice is crucial. In a colloquium I gave at Yale in 2008 under the auspices of the South Asian Studies Council, I noted that this appeared to be a normative pedagogical discursive strategy in this tradition, which seemed to be appreciated by

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<sup>22</sup> “Guru-yoga” refers to the practice of regarding the teacher, or lama (*bla ma*), and the Buddha deities as being of the same essence, since they are seen as fully enlightened Buddhas. This sort of visualization, where two, three, or four Buddha deities are “seen” as simultaneously present in the image of only one Buddha deity, is one of the ultimate goals for practitioners on the tantric path. The traditional example of the sameness and simultaneity of Buddhas—no matter their outer appearances—is given as follows: the many reflections of the moon one can see in several buckets of water do not mean that there are several moons; each one is a reflection of the same essence. Another traditional visualization involves the image of the Dalai Lama, for example, since Tibetans view him as the Buddha of Compassion. The two are seen as inseparable. This concept is traditionally exemplified by the mixing of milk and water, which results in an inseparable combination.

<sup>23</sup> Ven. Pencho Rabgey is a renowned Tibetan-Canadian elder *Chöd* practitioner who was a monk for twenty-seven years and a student at Sera Monastic University in Tibet for nine years. Ven. Rabgey, to whom I also refer as Gen Rabgey-la and “Pa-la” (his nickname), began studying the *Chöd* tradition at age fourteen under his root teacher, Genshe Tinley, who also studied at Sera. Pa-la was appointed *dbu mdzad* (“chanting master”/music director) of his home village’s monastery in Chungba Valley, in Litang, Kham, which is located on the southwest-facing upper slope of a lush green, forested mountainside on the southeastern corner of the Tibetan plateau.



the ritual experts in attendance. I indicated that the main goal for a student-in-training—who is considered fortunate to have found a qualified teacher and to be receiving instruction in ritual performance—is to shift gradually from a *performance*-centered practice (wherein the “outer” performance of musical instruments, vocally produced melodies, and performance practices are preoccupying the new practitioner so much that she cannot yet meditate effectively on the meanings encoded in the liturgical text) to a *practice*-centered performance (wherein the music-related aspects have become internalized and, once embodied, are simply no longer a “music performance” issue, such that the practitioner can focus fully on the meditational instructions described in the pithy, vivid poetry).

This distinction notwithstanding, through my analysis I discovered how at the advanced levels the external musical performance maps onto and enhances the internal meditational performance. Thus, it illustrates dynamically why it is that Buddhism, as expressed in liturgical ritual music practice contexts, should be regarded and treated, in both pedagogical approach and performance analysis, as (a) performing art.

### **Buddhism as Performing Art: Historiography of Tibetan Ritual Studies**

From a historiographical perspective, Stephan Beyer’s *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet*<sup>24</sup> follows in a tradition of Western scholars attempting to deal with the voluminous number and kinds of rituals practiced in Tibetan tantric Buddhism, as well as the intricacy and multivalent aspects of their performance. Beyer locates his as the fourth major attempt to accomplish this task. At the top of this list, in order of historical appearance, he places Ferdinand Lessing’s study of Yung-ho-kung, the magnificent Tibetan Buddhist temple complex in Beijing. Lessing attempted to deal with an unwieldy mass of material in discussing all the rituals that took place in the various spaces within this temple complex.<sup>25</sup> Tibetologist David Snellgrove similarly attempted to discuss all the rituals that he had seen take place at Chiwang Monastery in his book *Buddhist Himalaya*.<sup>26</sup> René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz honed his project *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* according to a different category of interest: away from the idea of describing the totality of rituals in a given place, instead focusing on a particular class of deity, the Tibetan protective deities, and associated rituals.<sup>27</sup>

Beyer acknowledges these three treatises in the nostalgic language of the ardent folklorist interested in the survival of traditions: “All three authors clearly felt deep bonds of affection for and sympathy with the Tibetans, and their works are important in their attempt to capture the

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<sup>24</sup> Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Ferdinand Lessing, *Yung-ho-kung: An Iconography of the Lamaist Cathedral in Peking*, vol. 18 of *Reports from the Scientific Expedition to the North-western Provinces of China under the Leadership of Dr. Sven Hedin* (Stockholm, 1942). I visited this large temple complex in August 2004. At that time the custodians appeared to be Buddhist monks of the Gelugpa School from Inner Mongolia.

<sup>26</sup> David L. Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya: Travels and Studies in Quest of the Origins and Nature of Tibetan Religion* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957).

<sup>27</sup> René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975).

spirit of a living tradition and to describe a practice of Buddhism which is still a vital force among an entire people.”<sup>28</sup> However, Beyer’s experience in observing a living tradition in situ—a Tibetan refugee community in Dalhousie, Himachel Pradesh, India—inspired him to take a different approach. None of the above-mentioned works, with their focuses on historical lineage (Snellgrove) or on place and iconography (the concerns of Lessing and Nebesky-Wojkowitz), takes precedence over Beyer’s fascination with the “detailed analyses of the complexities of Tibetan ritual.”<sup>29</sup> Lessing writes, “A book could well be written describing in detail these rites alone, with the ritual books translated, annotated, and illustrated by sketches, drawings and photographs.”<sup>30</sup>

Beyer’s insight, which changed the direction of his dissertation project to examine in detail the “processes and presuppositions” underlying the performative content of rituals associated with the deity Tārā, is similar to that which guided my approach to the analysis of the *Chöd* ritual practice. Beyer explains why he came to focus on ritual practice *as* performance:

The paper began originally as a history of the goddess Tārā, but once in the field, I found myself growing more and more engrossed in the “actual practice” of Buddhist ritual as a study in itself; a scholar from our secular society, I discovered, may too easily ignore the fact that *Buddhism is basically a performing art* [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, this article is motivated by a need to address how extremely performative the *Chöd* ritual is in all of its *sādhana* and ritual manifestations—essentially, to investigate how much it is like a performing art, both in its performance in ritual practice contexts and in the unusual life path of the *Chöd* adept. The literary focus of Western scholars of Buddhism—who clearly have great affinity with the tradition and are informally effusive in their regard for the music and sung verses—has produced scholarship on *Chöd* that mostly leaves the performance dimension aside. As a corrective, I value Beyer’s (ethnographic and textual, mixed-methods) approach in attempting to understand all that occurs in a Tibetan ritual liturgy in terms of both music performance and meditation practice. This study of the role of music in the meditation practices of the *Chöd* rite closes a gap left by previous ethnomusicological work on Tibetan ritual music by discussing the ways in which *Chöd* is performatively dissimilar to the Tibetan tantric ritual performance genres concerned with monastic orchestral instrumental ensembles.

### **Contrasting Tibetan Ritual Music Genres: Monastic Ensemble Rituals and *Chöd* Rituals**

A broad study of the Buddhist musicological literature on Tibetan ritual indicates that there are considerable differences between monastic ensemble ritual performances and *Chöd* ritual performances. Previous work on Tibetan tantric ritual music has focused primarily on (1) vocal chant (*dbyangs*), which is (2) often performed in large, instrumentally accompanied ensembles

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<sup>28</sup> Beyer, *Cult of Tārā*, xi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>30</sup> Lessing, *Yung-ho-kung*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Beyer, *Cult of Tārā*, xii.

(3) within monastic institutions, (4) where specially trained monk musicians occupy the role of ritual performers.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, the *Chöd* rite primarily involves (1) singing melodies (*rta*) in the tenor and baritone ranges, rather than chanting in the deep bass range;<sup>33</sup> (2) solo performance (ideally), rather than in an ensemble setting;<sup>34</sup> (3) performances that often take place outside in nature (at prescribed sites), rather than within monastic institutions; and (4) both lay and ordained individuals are allowed to practice *Chöd*. The ritual is particularly cherished by lay individuals; among the ordained, the majority are not exclusively males (monks), as many nuns practice as well. There is evidence of an absence of restrictions based on gender with respect to gaining access to *Chöd* initiations and permissions. Both male and female initiates receive approval to thereafter attend teachings and take music lessons in how to play and use the ritual instruments (See Table 1, below).

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<sup>32</sup> See Alice Egyed, “Theory and Practice of Music in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Tradition” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington-Seattle, 2000); Mireille Helffer, “An Overview of Western Work on Ritual Music of Tibetan Buddhism (1960–1990),” in Max Peter Baumann, Artur Simon, and Ulrich Wegner, eds., *European Studies in Ethnomusicology: Historical Developments and Recent Trends: Selected Papers Presented at the Seventh European Seminar in Ethnomusicology, Berlin, October 1–16, 1992* (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel, 1992), 87–101; Mireille Helffer, *Mchod-rol. Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* (Paris: CNRS Editions / Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1994); Daniel A. Scheidegger, *Tibetan Ritual Music: A General Survey with Special Reference to the Mindroling Tradition* (Zurich: Tibetan Institute, 1988); Peter Crossley-Holland, “The State of Research in Tibetan Folk Music,” in Jamyang Norbu, ed., *Zlos Gar: Performing Traditions of Tibet* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1986), 105–24; Ter Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979); Ricardo Canzio, “The Place of Music and Chant in Tibetan Religious Culture,” in P. Kvaerne and M. Brauen, eds., *Tibetan Studies* (Zurich: Volkerkunde Museum der Universität Zürich, 1978); Walter Kaufmann, *Tibetan Buddhist Chant: Musical Notations and Interpretations of a Song Book by the Bkah brgyud pa and Sa skya pa sect* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975); Mona Schrempf, “From ‘Devil Dance’ to ‘World Healing’: Some Representations, Perceptions, and Innovations of Contemporary Tibetan Ritual Dances,” in Frank J. Korom and Ernst Steinkeller, *Proceedings of the Seventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies: Graz 1995* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995), 4: 91–102; Ivan Vandor, “Aesthetics and Ritual Music: Some Remarks with Reference to Tibetan Music,” *The World of Music* 18/2 (1976): 29–32; Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (New York: Brill, 1996). Yael Bentor’s research showed that ritual specialists are often not only expert musicians (instrumentalists and vocalists), but also sand or wood *mandala* artists, skilled architects of stupas and butter sculptures, and ritual cake (*gtor ma*) offerings. For an overview of Buddhist ethnomusicology on Tibet and Mongolia, see Paul D. Greene, Keith Howard, Terry E. Miller, Phong T. Nguyen, and Hwee-San Tan. “Buddhism and the Musical Cultures of Asia: A Critical Literature Survey,” *The World of Music* 44/2 (2002): 138–41.

<sup>33</sup> The soprano and alto ranges are also accepted within the tradition.

<sup>34</sup> There are two caveats here. *Chöd* ensembles are utilized when there are several people learning the tradition (in which case students meet regularly to train in the ritual practices and meditation performances as a group) and the specific ritual and/or performance context (i.e., pilgrimage) calls for group participation.

*Table 1: Contrasting Tibetan Ritual Musics: Monastic Ensemble vs. Chöd Ritual**A. ELEMENTS OF CONTRAST*

Music Performance Aspect	Monastic Ensemble Ritual	<i>Chöd</i> Ritual
1. Melodic Style	deep bass tone contour chant ( <i>dbyangs</i> )	higher range baritone/tenor ( <i>rta</i> ) soprano/alto
2. Ensemble / Solo	ensemble performances	solo or group (pedagogy)
3. Site / Context	monastic institutions	outside institutions, prescribed
4. Performers	monks (trained specialists)	ordained and lay practitioners
5. Gender	females traditionally excluded	female adepts common
6. Instrumentation	<u>various instruments:</u> cymbals ( <i>sbug chal</i> , <i>sil snyan</i> ) long horns ( <i>dung chen</i> ) oboes ( <i>rgya gling</i> ) drums ( <i>rnga</i> )	<u>specific <i>Chöd</i> ritual instruments:</u> hourglass-drum ( <i>damaru</i> ) Tibetan bell ( <i>dril bu</i> ) thighbone trumpet ( <i>rkang gling</i> )
7. Musical Roles	musical division of labor	adept plays all instruments
8. Music Notation	widespread	passed on orally
9. Pedagogy	literacy and aural training	aural training <sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The use of aural training has changed over the past thirty years with the advent of consumer recording technology, which provides students of *Chöd* with the ability to study the *Chöd* melodies on their own. While staying in Buxa Duar refugee camp in India, the *Chöd* lama would introduce a new melody by repeating it only twice and expect the students to have memorized it by the next day; such are the rigors of music pedagogy in Tibetan contexts. For information on Buxa Duar, see John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997 [1979]), 72.

**B. ELEMENTS OF SIMILARITY**

Music Performance Aspect	Ensemble ritual	<i>Chöd</i> ritual
Liturgy	precomposed (not through-composed or improvised)	precomposed
Pedagogy	extensive training required, with instrument experts	extensive training required, <i>guru-śiṣhyā paramparā</i> <sup>36</sup>
Instruments	no stringed instruments	no stringed instruments

*Musical Instruments in Chöd Ritual Practice*

Following these categorical distinctions, further contrast can be made between the musical instruments used in these practices.<sup>37</sup> *Chöd* practitioners play the highly symbolic instruments: the large hourglass-shaped drum (*damaru*, or *cang te'u*),<sup>38</sup> the Tibetan bell (*dril bu*),<sup>39</sup> and the thighbone trumpet (*rkang gling*). When compared with the variety of instruments sounded by Tibetan monastic ensembles—which include aerophones (long horns, conch shell, oboes, and trumpets), metallophones (cymbals and bells), and membranophones (double-skin frame drums of numerous sizes, and the small hourglass-drum, or *damaru*<sup>40</sup>)—*Chöd* may seem to have a limited range of expression. Yet among its three instruments/implements, *Chöd* incorporates a membranophone (*damaru*), metallophone (*dril bu*), and aerophone (*rkang gling*). Thus, according to the Sachs-Hornbostel system for the classification of musical instruments, the *Chöd* ritual instruments are at least categorically representative of the instruments used in other Tibetan monastic ensemble ritual performance traditions. Similarly, all these performance traditions deliberately lack a chordophone (stringed instrument), as it is considered too worldly for

<sup>36</sup> This term denotes the method of guru-disciple transmission of musical traditions known in South Asian contexts, which is often also coupled with spiritual lineage traditions.

<sup>37</sup> Tantric ritual music instruments are also referred to as “ritual implements” because of their function as important symbolic referents to aspects of the practice. See Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 87–112.

<sup>38</sup> Some *damaru* drums are made from bone and referred to as skull-drums (*thod rnga*).

<sup>39</sup> Mireille Helffer, “A Typology of the Tibetan Bell,” in Barbara Nimri Azziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds., *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985). See also Mireille Helffer, *Chöd-rol. Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* (Paris: CRNS Editions / Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> The small *damaru* is typically played in tandem with the *dril bu*. The practitioner holds the small *damaru* with the right hand and the *dril bu* with the left. See Ellingson, *Mandala of Sound*, 642–43.

religious ceremonial contexts.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, despite its unique social and musical configurations, *Chöd* is a liturgically based vocal performance tradition. In this respect, there is no difference at all between *Chöd* and other tantric rituals across Tibetan religious society.

#### *Group vs. Solo Performance Practice*

In terms of *Chöd* performance, it is necessary for each practitioner to learn to play all the instruments since *Chöd* does not have the musical “division of labor” common to the more extensive ritual music ensembles found in monastic settings. The reason for this emphasis on solo performance has to do with the social context in which practitioners aim to perform the ritual. *Chöd* is an ascetic tradition with prescribed performance locations for the solitary yogin/yoginī retreatant. The *Chöd* practitioner must know how to perform all the instruments herself while practicing alone in isolated locales.<sup>42</sup>

Within the context of group performance (whenever there are two or more performers), a music director or “*ömdzay*” (*dbu mdzad*) leads the *Chöd* ritual performance. In this respect, a hierarchy familiar in some respects to that of the monastic ritual ensemble is retained in group *Chöd* performance. The person in this musical role leads off both the drumming and singing and determines the musical pitch at which each of the melodies for each of the subritual sections should begin in a given *Chöd sādhana*. He or she adjusts the pitch level and tempo of each meditation section, gauging the range of each melody (highest and lowest pitches to be sung) as well as the incremental rise in pitch that is expected in ritual performances. Often the *dbu mdzad* will perform the *kangling* along with the *damaru* at the appointed moments in the liturgical text. However, this instrumental role may be shared with all or some of the other practitioners. There may be one person who is designated as the person who blows the *kangling*, or several participants who play together. Even lacking the physical presence of a *kangling* at the ritual performance, the sound of “calling” is to be mentally imagined and all beings summoned forth are visualized assembling around the practitioner, like geese in a lotus pond. There are some advanced rituals in the *Chöd* corpus, such as the 108-spring wilderness retreat (*chu mig rgya rtsa*), in which group practice is typically the protocol for *Chöd* trainees since it is considered safer than solo practice. This ritual involves the consecutive performance of a *Chöd sādhana* at 108 different sites in as many days and nights, and the practitioner should have received special initiations and permissions before embarking on this extended stay in the wilderness.

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<sup>41</sup> In Tibetan religious contexts, stringed instruments play a symbolic role in “mentally produced music” and may be placed as offerings on an altar or carried in processions, “but their physical sound-production belongs to secular music.” See Ellingson, *Mandala of Sound*, 565.

<sup>42</sup> Group *Chöd* performance with fellow initiates is seen as one of the main methods for the practice of *Chöd*.

### **Buddhist Ethnomusicology: Approaches to Performance Practice**

Research on *Chöd* provides a space for the conceptualization of performance practice as the integrated study of sound and context. As Gerard Béhague writes of the musical occasion taken as an object of study, “it becomes imperative to document the total and often multiple contextual dimensions of that occasion.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, this project represents a contribution to the study of Tibetan tantric ritual performance practices as ritual performance events that take place in social, cultural, environmental, and physical contexts and within the mental life of their participants.

#### *The Ritual Experience*

Several functions of music in a *Chöd* ritual are related to the musical instruments that shape the experience. I will give a short introduction here, followed by a more elaborate exposition regarding rhythm, melody, and text. The reader may recall that all of the following functions operate as a continuous musical performance in the context of fear.

#### *Ritual Instruments/Implements*

Along with the voice, three important musical ritual instruments are used in *Chöd* practice.

1. An advanced *Chöd* practitioner understands the hourglass-shaped drum (*ḍamaru*) to be not merely symbolizing but producing the sound of emptiness. Because sound is produced, it is impermanent and therefore empty of self-existence.<sup>44</sup> For the beginner, the two sides of the drum symbolize the conventional and ultimate truths, and the clappers (or pellets) striking them simultaneously symbolize the ultimate nature of mind.<sup>45</sup>
2. The Tibetan bell (*dril bu*) symbolizes wisdom, which is the realization of emptiness. It is played as a rhythmically ornamented accompaniment to the drum in the same basic rhythmic figures and tempo, though the music is far more ornamented.
3. The thighbone trumpet, or *kangling* (*rkang gling*), calls all beings to the offering feast and reminds the practitioner of impermanence.

#### *Melody, Mantra, and Rhythmic Flow*

The vocal melody, mantric utterance, and rhythmic flow also play important symbolic functions within the context of *sādhana* performance.

1. Singing the melody (*rta*) is an act of performing guru-yoga, because one is invoking the blessings of the lineage lamas. The melodies were developed by lamas who achieved

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<sup>43</sup> In this reformulated definition, the notion of “performance practice” is highly germane to Buddhist tantric ritual studies. See Gerard Béhague, “Introduction,” in *Performance Practice: Ethnomusicological Perspectives*, ed. Gerard Béhague (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 3–11. Béhague was a former president of the Society for Ethnomusicology (1979–81) and editor of the journal *Ethnomusicology* (1974–78).

<sup>44</sup> In Tibetan, this is rendered as *sgra chos can mi rtag te byas pa'i phyi*. *sgra chos can* means “sound”; *mi rtag te* refers to impermanence; *byas pa'i phyir* means “because it is a product.”

<sup>45</sup> See Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret *Gcod Ḍamaru*: An Exploration of Musical Instrument Symbolism,” *Asian Music* 10/2 (1971): 63–91; and Jeffrey W. Cupchik, “The Tibetan *gCod Ḍamaru*—A Reprise: Symbolism, Function and Difference in a Tibetan Adept’s Interpretive Community,” *Asian Music* 44/1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 113–39.

realizations while engaging in *Chöd* practice. Their melodies are said to embody their insights and convey blessings. Correct performance of their melodies brings merit and blessings, as the melodies are said to be the “actual wisdom of the Buddhas.”<sup>46</sup>

2. Singing produces a joyful feeling.<sup>47</sup> While singing, one is anchored to the melodic movement, even as the eerie sounds of one’s singing in a haunted place bring strange echoes and acoustical reverberations that elicit feelings of exposure and insecurity. This is meant to enhance the vivid appearance of the habitual self that the adept ordinarily seeks to protect.
3. Rhythmically, the constancy of the *damaru* anchors one to the ongoing practice despite any perceived outer or inner mental distraction. The flow of drum, bell, and melody in rhythmic unison keeps the mind focused on the task without wandering.<sup>48</sup>
4. The rhythm may also function as a mnemonic referent to textual poetry in sections such as the seven-branch offering, in which the “chom-den-de” (*bcom ldan ‘das*) anapest pattern offers a performative complement to the verse.
5. The mantric utterance “*Phaṭ*” has several functions: spoken softly, it clears away obstacles and hindrances, pacifies harmdoers, and so forth. As well, the “*Ga-te*” mantra of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* is recited during *Chöd* practice in rhythmic concordance with the *damaru* at the same time that the *kangling* is blown to call all beings to the site.
6. At a macro level, each melody is composed as a two- or four-line verse that is sung to each two- or four-line stanza of *sādhana* poetry in a subritual. While the musical verses have the same musical content, the poetic stanzas have a changing content of visualizations that are related to the subritual in question.
7. Each melody evokes a mood (Skt. *rasa*) appropriate to the meditation. Assigned purposefully to a particular meditation section, the melody sustains the mood for the duration of the meditation subritual section.

### *Convergence of Layers in Chöd Ritual Practice*

Since *Chöd* training involves study of these various aspects of ritual separately prior to combining them, it is prudent to consider a theoretical approach that can accommodate multilayered study and performance. Furthermore, analysis of the ritual is made possible by considering the various layers both separately and together. The *Chöd* ritual performance can be investigated more deeply through the ethnomusicological technique of transcription. This is a procedure that sets down, in a visual medium, the layers of performance in the ritual. A layer in

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<sup>46</sup> Molk, *Chöd in the Ganden Tradition*, 58–59.

<sup>47</sup> Jackson discusses the celebratory tone in the singing of “songs of experience” (*nyams mgur*). Joy is also a component of the experience in *Chöd* ritual performance. See Roger R. Jackson, “‘Poetry’ in Tibet: *Glu, mgur, sNyan ngag* and ‘Songs of Experience,’” in José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996), 384. Further, Ellingson notes that Tibetan and Indian authors express “joy at having overcome an obstacle [or] hopes for future success.” See Ellingson, *Mandala of Sound*, 67.

<sup>48</sup> Ven. Pencho Rabgey, personal communication, October 1997.



the performance here refers to one layer within the whole ritual, such as the poetic text (describing the mental visualizations), the sung melodies (which have discernible accordant patterns that complement the text), the performed rhythms (constantly interwoven with the performed text, sometimes as a mnemonic), the blown “calling” of spirits through the thighbone trumpet and the use of the bell and other musical implements, and all intentionally performed utterances and gestures, such as the powerful pacifying mantra “*Phaṭ.*”

In this respect, the *Chöd* ritual can be thought of as having an internal intertextuality and of being an intertextual performance event, requiring layered study of each of the “textual” elements.<sup>49</sup> Each of the ritual’s layers, or textual elements, demands a separate type of training on the part of the adept, such as the vocal production, the study of the rhythmic sway of the two-sided drum, the playing of the Tibetan bell, and the intentional meditation in blowing of the thighbone trumpet and performing the mantric utterance “*Phaṭ.*”

The practitioner’s study of melodies requires periods of intense concentration while trying to reproduce the manner of vocal production. These highly ornamented melodies require special use of vibrato in the glottal area of the trachea. It takes tremendous effort to achieve a level at which this stylized vocal production can become so seamless, like the playing of the *damaru*, that the manner of singing ornately comes as second nature. In any event, the musical performance is significant as a multilayered, intertextual energizing of the poetic text, which brings the liturgy to life in the mind-space of visualization.

### Music–Poetry Correspondences in a *Chöd* Ritual

The *sādhana* focused on here is entitled *Dedicating the Illusory Body* (*sgyu lus tshogs su sngo ba*) and is arguably the most common *Chöd* ritual *sādhana* performed in the Ganden *Chöd* lineage tradition.<sup>50</sup> As a skillfully executed performance by an experienced *Chöd* meditation practitioner, it becomes a powerful ritual for the development of altruism (*bodhicitta*) and an antidote to self-grasping ignorance.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of structure, there are seventy-six stanzas, each with two or four lines, and each line has nine syllables, which is one of the common traditional Tibetan liturgical meters. There are four preliminary sections and five sections of the actual practice. The actual practice includes the “transference of consciousness” (*pho ba*) practice, followed by all the distributions (“white,” “red,” and “manifold”) of offering and giving, meditations on emptiness and on the “three circles of giving,” and the “dedication”:

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<sup>49</sup> Recognizing that the notion of intertextuality is generally associated with the study across different events and materials, I am employing it here in order to denote the differentiated training and study in *Chöd* ritual performance and meditation as external and internal aspects of an integrated process.

<sup>50</sup> Lama Zopa and Kathleen McDonald, *Cutting Off the Truly Existent “I”: Dedicating the Illusory Body* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1983). The original Tibetan source is pa bong ka bde chen snying po, *sgyu lus tshogs su sngo ba*, “Dedicating the Illusory Body.”

<sup>51</sup> Janice D. Willis, *Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Ganden Oral Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), xiv. As Willis points out, the lineage holders of the Ganden *Chöd* tradition were *siddhas*, “accomplished or perfected” enlightened beings.

white distribution (*dkar 'gyed*)

red distribution (*dmār 'gyed*)

manifold distribution (*sna tshogs 'gyed*)

meditation on the “giving of dharma” (*chos kyi spyin pa*)<sup>52</sup>

There are extensive pre- and post-meditation ritual practices, but limited space prevents discussion here.

During this *sādhana* ritual practice, all meditative events are experienced performatively, with the constancy of the rhythmic drumming pattern underlying nearly all twelve melodies. The rhythmic ostinato grounds the visualized events because it links all the melodies of the sections together. Each melody, adhering to a particular meditation section, is thereby rhythmically connected to the broader arc of the drama. Moreover, each section appears to play a dramatic role along the progression of meditative experiences and emotional states. This *Chöd sādhana* is characterized by melodic continuities, sectionally defined transitions,<sup>53</sup> and demarcated shifts from one melody to the next as required by the structure of the subritual meditations (See Table 2, below).

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<sup>52</sup> After giving and providing for all beings' material needs and wants, the practitioner engages in the “giving of dharma,” which involves singing verses to all the beings assembled the ways in which to maintain peaceful accord with one another by attending to the “three doors” of body, speech and mind according to Buddhist doctrine.

<sup>53</sup> The mantric utterance “*Phaṭ*” is recited softly at the beginning of each subritual section. Also, before starting each new melody, a moment of transition allows for brief reflection to reset the practitioner's motivation, or to prepare for the next section. This is conducted without verbal recitation while the drum is still being played.

Table 2: Ritual Structure of the Chöd Sādhana, Dedicating the Illusory Body

Meditation Section	Ritual Action	Verses (lines)	Melody
<b>A. PRELIMINARIES: <u>Training and purifying one's mindstream</u> through the four great commentaries</b>			
^ ^ ^ ^ 1			
1. <u>Going for Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta</u> to make one's mind a suitable receptacle	Peaceful ( <i>zhi wa</i> )	3(4) <sup>2</sup>	4 A
2. <u>Guru Yoga</u> to be able to receive blessings	Peaceful	4(4)	4 B
3. <u>Seven Branch Offering Practice</u>	Increasing ( <i>rje pa</i> )	5(2)	2 C
4. <u>Mandala Offering</u> to accumulate merit	Increasing	6(2)	2 D
5. <u>Requesting Blessings from Lamas</u> : Flowing of nectar from "Āh" to purify sins/obscurations	Increasing	13(4)	2 E
<b>B. ACTUAL PRACTICE: <u>Accumulating the two collections of merit</u> to lay imprints for the two divine bodies</b>			
6. <u>Stages of the White Distribution</u> :			
<u>1<sup>st</sup> melody: Cutting the Body/Transforming</u>	Powerful ( <i>wang pa</i> )	3(2)+2(2)+2(2)+3(2)	2 F
<i>Offering the refined parts of one's body by transforming them into nectar</i>			
7. <u>2<sup>nd</sup> melody: Offering/Distributing</u>	Increasing	1(4)+5(2)	2 G
^ ^ ^			
8. <u>Stages of the Red Distribution</u> : Offering the remaining flesh and blood	Powerful	3(4)	2 H
^ ^ ^			
9. <u>The Manifold Distribution</u> : Offering the skin by transforming it into desired things	Powerful	1(4)	2 I
^ ^ ^			
10. <u>Giving Dharma and Meditating on "Taking and Giving" (tong len)</u> <i>Inviting beings to return back to their own abodes</i>	Powerful	5(4)+1(4)	2 I
11. <u>Meditating on Emptiness</u> , on three circles of giving	Peaceful	1(4)	4 J
<i>Meditating on the lack of intrinsic existence to accumulate the collection of wisdom</i>			
<b>C. DEDICATION: <u>Dedicating the accumulated root virtues</u></b>			
12. <u>Dedicating the accumulated root virtues</u> to the unsurpassable great enlightenment	Peaceful	4(4)+3(4)	2 K
^ ^ ^			
13. <u>Thought Training Prayer</u> to make fervent sealing of merit	Increasing	9(4)+3(4)+3(4)	2 L

<sup>1</sup> The symbol "^^^" refers to the meditative interlude during the practice, at which time the practitioner rhythmically depicts *The Heart Sutra* "Ga te" mantra played on the *damaru drum*. At the same time the thighbone trumpet or *kangling (rkang gling)* is blown to call forth beings.

<sup>2</sup> In the expression "#(#)" the first digit refers to the number of stanzas in a section; the second, in parentheses, refers to the number of lines in a stanza. The stanzas are generally two or four lines in length, and each line is composed of nine syllables.

I will now focus on one of the subrituals that functions as the climactic bridge into the “actual practice” where the practitioner performs the first of the four distributions (‘gyed) mentioned above, including “the white distribution” (*dkar ‘gyed*). In Table 2, this moment in the sequence of meditative and musical performative activities is denoted as the sixth subritual in the *sādhana* (shown as number 6 in the left margin). This melody initially covers the setting of the body’s meditational posture and the visualization of the position of the subtle consciousness, which is seen initially as situated within the central channel at the body’s navel chakra. The liturgy provides a vivid description of the position of the body and the central channel, which is to be imagined “as straight as an arrow.” Then, however, as a subritual within this subritual, after three (two-line) verses of singing this melody, the rhythmic drumming continues while the subtle consciousness is brought upwards through the central channel, impelled by successive utterances of a single sacred syllable: first from the navel to the heart chakra, then from the heart to the throat chakra, and so on, up to the crown chakra, and finally, on the fifth utterance of the sacred syllable, up and out into the heart of the guru-deity, who is visualized in a rainbow-like form in space just above the practitioner. The melody resumes for one verse, “My old body falls down, abandoned; appearing whitish and oily, it covers a billion worlds.” With the next utterance of the sacred syllable, the practitioner’s consciousness emerges from the heart of the guru, as a *ḍākinī* (Tib. *mkha’ ‘gro ma*). As the sung liturgy describes, “My mind emerges from the heart of the guru-deity, in the aspect of a *ḍākinī* holding a curved knife.” Each of these mantric utterances is spoken in rhythmic time, carefully coordinated with the ongoing rhythmic ostinato played on the *ḍamaru*.

In terms of visualization of the deity and the performance of guru-deity yoga, within the scope of tantric practice, most “highest yoga tantra” ritual practices involve a visualization of the guru-deity dissolving into the practitioner, who then becomes inseparable with it and subsequently performs guru-deity yoga activities. *Chöd* practice is somewhat unique in this respect, the difference being that the ritual utilizes the “*phowa*” (*‘pho ba*) or “transfer of consciousness” practice to eject the mind from the body and, in the way described above, transform into the guru-deity. It is often said that tantra involves “bringing the result into the path.” Although Vajrayāna (tantric) Buddhism is a vast subject, its rituals, practices, and “internal” and “external” performance techniques may be learned gradually and effectively under the tutelage of a qualified teacher after one has received an initiation from a qualified lama within a recognized lineage. Although beginner practitioners of *Chöd* (or any tantric practice) have not yet fully developed the seed of enlightenment in their mindstreams, they are believed to naturally possess the essential seeds and qualities of a Buddha (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*, Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po*) such that, given the ripening of causes and conditions, they will eventually become Buddhas. Thus, once initiated, they are permitted to visualize such transformations before they actually achieve the state of an enlightened Buddha.

### The Role of Music in *Chöd*: Paradoxical Claims?

Typically, during the oral transmission of the *Chöd* ritual, the lama will insist that music is not the central point of the practice. Rather, one should focus the mind on increasing one's level of altruism (*bodhicitta*) and attaining a deeper level of realizing the nature of interdependence (emptiness). According to a preeminent mid- to late twentieth-century exponent of the ritual practice, Kyabje Rinpoche, former head of the Ganden *Chöd* tradition, one does not even need the music to practice *Chöd*. Ven. Pencho Rabgey-la echoes this sentiment when he tells me legends of *Chöd* adepts (including his own teacher) who found it just as effective to sit in a cemetery (a "sky-burial" site in Tibet) at night to perform silent meditation, thinking through the process of a *sādhana*, mentally performing all the visualizations in each step, and in this way reaching attainments.

Yet it is also the case that every *Chöd* lama implores his students to learn the melodies and instruments correctly, and some lamas may quietly display disappointment when this has not been sufficiently achieved. Although seemingly paradoxical, both positions have their validity. My interest in the musical aspects of *Chöd* stems, at least partly, from this seeming paradox. Since musical performance is a constant and complex feature of the ritual, one may ask, what *are* the functions of music in the *Chöd* ritual? Or, to put it differently, how do the various aspects of the music ritual performance assist one in the meditation practice? Kyabje Rinpoche notes that the study and practice of *Chöd* involve cultivated musical training and an appreciation of musical symbolism, style, and execution.<sup>54</sup>

Kyabje Rinpoche's pedagogical advice given to practitioners during a *Chöd* transmission is extremely instructive in several ways. He states:

It is important to remember that the *Chöd* melodies are not the compositions of chanting beggars, but the wisdom of Buddha in actuality. For that reason, reciting *Chöd* authentically, to the original melodies, creates great merit. In the same way, *Guru Puja* must be kept pure. If the melodies degenerate, the authenticity and blessings will be lost. Some of the melodies used in this *Chöd* system are those composed by Machik Labdrön herself, particularly the section on the body being cut up. *This melody was inspired by the sound of flapping wings of vultures arriving for a "sky-burial"* [emphasis added].<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he insists that the practitioner must memorize the *sādhana*'s written liturgy. Otherwise, it is argued, how will he or she be able to perform in the complete darkness of night? Memorization is not a prerequisite for training, but it is necessary for going to the *nyen sa* (frightful places) at night. For more details on Kyabje Rinpoche's instructions on the manner of practice, see David Molk, ed., *Chöd in the Ganden Tradition: The Oral Instructions of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–62. "Sky-burial" is a traditional Tibetan funerary rite by which bodies of ordinary deceased persons are disposed. It follows the ritual services and prayers that guide the consciousness through the "in-between" or "intermediate" stage (*bar do*) of death and rebirth. Instead of subterranean burial or cremation (which is done for holy persons, lamas, or in some cases after there has been an accident), ordinary persons are brought to a cemetery (charnel ground) near the top of a mountain. A mortician who knows how to flay a corpse will cut the four limbs off the main body first and strip the flesh from the bone, chop up the limbs in smaller pieces at the joints, and crush those bones into fragments with a large stone or hammer. He might arrange the remains in two piles: one of flesh, the other of bone. These smaller pieces are necessary so that animals and birds that scavenge for such carrion, like vultures, will be able to consume the body completely. In some Tibetan locales, another method, known as "water-burial," is practiced,

### *Image of Vultures and Tone Painting*

The last point is arguably the most important from an ethnomusicological perspective, implying as it does that one of the composition techniques used in *Chöd* meditation practice rituals is tone painting. Tone painting is the name given to a technique of composition whereby culturally relevant musical gestures are combined—in melody, instrumentation, and rhythm—to conjure up an image in the mind of the listener. To put this in another way, a composer evokes an image musically through culturally understood semiotic gestures. Often naturalistic imagery is depicted, such as the elements and forces of nature.

### *Musical Depictions, Literary Concordances*

Machik Labdrön composed the melody for the first section of the “actual practice” of the ritual in which there is the visualization of separating consciousness from body and then preparing the body for transformation and distribution. This enables the practitioner to visualize the pulling up and flapping of vultures’ wings more effectively with each rising two-note gesture displaying a short-long rhythm (See Example 1, below). The transcription indicates an initial upward moving sequence of successively higher starting pitches of a two-note ascending melodic gesture, characterizing the first half of the melody. This is “answered” by the “gliding” and “settling down” of the vultures characterized by the pitch contour in the second half of the melody. The palpable mental image that Machik Labdrön evokes through musical gesture enhances the mood that the practitioner cultivates in the process of visualization. There is a dramatic transformation taking place as she prepares first to separate her consciousness from the body, and then to distribute the old body to all invited guests. The practitioner will utilize this image in meditation when the *ḍākinī*, whose identity is the practitioner’s own transformed consciousness, is visualized flaying the old body.

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where the remaining body of the deceased person is similarly broken into smaller pieces and then put in a river, providing a meal for fish to consume. Though some cultural commentators associate this ritual with barbarism, Tibetans consider sky-burial and water-burial to be ecologically sound ways to dispose of the body. With the consciousness already departed from the body, no harm is done to anyone. For further context, see Dan Martin, “On the Cultural Ecology of Sky Burial on the Himalayan Plateau,” *East and West* 46 (1997): 353–70.

*Example 1: White Distribution, “Cutting the Body,” from Machik Labdrön, Dedicating the Illusory Body*

mp

Voice

Rang gi - spyi wo nas - bzung - lte wa'i bar

Damaru

in out

lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang

dbu ma phyi dkar - nang dmar - mda' smyug tsam.

lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang

*Melodic Parameters*

The melody has to obey the conventions of the genre (it must match the musical language and syntax of the other melodies in the *sādhana*) and also uniquely mark the imagined event with culturally appropriate musical gestures. It demands artistic skill to distill the essence of an abstract idea into a concrete image, that is, to evoke an image, or scene, with a single melodic line, just as it requires skill to condense the essence of a large written work into a *précis*, abstract, or sound bite.

In a *Chöd sādhana*, the musical texture is largely homophonic:<sup>56</sup> one main melodic line is dominant, while other musical parts (played by instruments or sung) enhance, accompany, or support it. There is an important caveat with respect to this categorical designation, however: although the *Chöd sādhana* requires only one sung melodic part in each meditation section, either at unison or at the octave, the musical texture in toto retains the melodic dominance of the voice—singing the liturgical poetry—and pitched instruments that influence the melodic texture.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, a melody is always rhythmic and has directionality, phrase structure, and

<sup>56</sup> In some subritual sections, such as during the “mandala offering,” a monophonic texture occurs, as there is no instrumental accompaniment.

<sup>57</sup> It could be argued that since the *damaru* is a pitched instrument, and the bell (*dril bu*) has a definite pitch producing a “flood” of harmonic overtones, therefore a *polyphonic* texture is heard. Yet since each of the main *Chöd*

certain pitches of importance, as well as shifting centers of pitch importance. In *Chöd* performance, the two-line stanza refrain is usually comprised of two sung musical phrases: a first phrase that departs from the home scale area to a related scale area, and a second phrase that returns from this related scale area to the home scale area.<sup>58</sup> A *sādhana* is usually designed so that a musical phrase can be expressed within one exhaling breath.

*Visualizing Music in Chöd Practice: Performing Sonic Iconography*

When the composer has such restricted room for creative realization of a visualization, a limited palette with which to paint a portrait of the meditative event, single brush strokes in an austere constructed sequence are required. When the melody aptly evokes the ascribed symbolic image, the repetitions of the melodic refrain act as the ideal canvas for the specific details of the poetic text-based meditative visualizations.

Machik Labdrön's melody aids the practitioner's meditation because it depicts the vultures' actions through sophisticated musical imagery. In depicting the fear and vulnerability associated with the onset of feeling attached to the body while vultures gather and circle above, the composer paints a scene that evokes an emotional response in the adept. Vultures fly confidently and prepare to land with four or five graceful flaps of their wings. The melody depicts this confidence with a soaring sequence of melodic leaps and a rapidly reached melodic climax on the sixth syllable of the first line of the two-line melody, with the rest of the melody heard as a dénouement. The music has five melodic leaps in an ascending sequence, followed by a descending contour. Each melodic leap sounds like a flapping of wings; altogether, it sounds like an arc of determined, focused action.

Remarkably, there is but one literal reference to "vultures" (*rgod po*) in this *sādhana*.<sup>59</sup> The reference is found, in fact, during the subritual section where this melody is sung. This makes sense in terms of the logical structure of the ritual, as this is the precise moment when the *Chöd* practitioner's consciousness is transferred into the lama's heart and the body is left on the ground.<sup>60</sup> While the practitioner's consciousness has subsequently emerged from the lama's heart as a *ḍākinī*, vultures would arrive to attend to the body at this moment and no other. The *sādhana* liturgical text proceeds as follows, in translation:

From the pathway of the supreme channel,  
I eject [my mind] into the guru-deity's heart [above].

*Phaṭ!* (x5)

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instruments acoustically retains its own fundamental pitch, it is probably more accurate to say that when the bell, *ḍamaru*, and voice are sounding simultaneously, *Chöd* exhibits an example of a type of drone polyphony.

<sup>58</sup> When the melody is set to a four-line stanza, there can be three or four musical phrases.

<sup>59</sup> "*Rgod po sha la lding bzhin gri gug gis / Spyi wo nas bzung sum phrag bar du gshags.*" This instance may be found below in the fourth translated verse.

<sup>60</sup> The moment the body "falls down" (*'gyel*) is given in Tibetan as "*Rang gi phung po rnying pa lings te 'gyel / Dkar zhing tsho la snum pas stong gsum khyab.*"



My old body falls down, abandoned,  
Appearing whitish and oily, it covers a billion worlds.

“*Pha!*” My mind emerges from the heart of the guru-deity,  
in the aspect of a *ḍākinī* holding a curved knife

Like a vulture circling above meat, holding the curved knife,  
[I swoop down and] from the crown to the groin, I cut.<sup>61</sup>

### *Musical and Liturgical Repercussions*

A revered *Chöd* lama’s oral commentarial discourse about music and imagery, which makes a clear connection between performed liturgical music and its ritual poetic text, is a very important convergence of data for research purposes into *Chöd* and Buddhist tantric liturgical ritual more generally. This is evidence from the oral tradition about the prescribed performance practices, a domain of concerns that is passed on from lama to disciple (*guru* to *śiṣhyā*) and one which ethnomusicological research often seeks to explore. It is significant that a melody is known to depict a particular visual image at all, be it of a *ḍākinī*, a vulture, or both. Because of the level of specificity in the “outer” depiction and its reference to an “inner” transformative practice, I think of the tone painting of naturalistic imagery in this context as an instance of “sonic iconography,” one that is devised by *Chöd* adepts for other adepts, and passed on through the oral tradition as such.

### *Critical Analysis of Symbolic Ambiguity*

This raises two questions that require further critical investigation. Does this tone-painting image, this sonic iconography, refer to the sounds of actual vultures’ wings, as the oral tradition claims? Or, since the *sādhana* refers to the actions of the *ḍākinī* at this moment with the phrase “like a vulture circling above meat,” does it refer instead to the *ḍākinī*’s actions? If the latter is the case, then since the written liturgy uses the Tibetan word *bzhin*, meaning “like” or “similar to,” are we to visualize that the *ḍākinī*/practitioner mimics the vulture’s flapping action? Given the sophistication in the use of homonyms and the adroit use of other poetic devices in this written liturgy, it is reasonable to conclude that there is not a perplexing ambiguity here, but rather a deliberate double-entendre.

To elaborate, the word “vultures,” as it appears in the written liturgy, appears to evoke two meanings. The mention of “vultures” in the *Chöd sādhana* seems at first glance to be a literal indication of the actions of the *ḍākinī*. Yet with the insight provided from the oral tradition about the image of vultures being musically depicted in the very same scene, it may require further

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<sup>61</sup> The four verses, in the original Tibetan, are as follows:

*Tsa mchog ah wa dhu ti'i rgyun lam nas / Bla ma lhaḡ pa'i lha yi thugs kar 'phangs*  
*Rang gi phung po rnying pa lings te 'gyel / Dkar zhing tsho la snum pas stong gsum khyab*  
*Pha! Rang sems bla ma lha yi thugs ka nas / Mkha' 'gro gri gug 'dzin pa'i rnam par thon*  
*Rgod po sha la lding bzhin gri gug gis / Spyi bo nas bzung sum phrag bar du gshags*

analysis. By placing these two “texts”—the sonic image of actual vultures arriving (to elicit the practitioner’s fear) and the poetic image of instructing the enlightened *ḍākinī* (to mimic the vulture’s confident deliberate circling)—into intertextual relief, “mapping” their ritual functions, it is possible to study the ways in which melody and poetry have been mutually designed to enhance the practitioner’s meditative experience.

With the exposure of the old body to the aerial scavengers and/or *ḍākinī*, the practitioner is faced simultaneously with the possibility of two perspectives. The written liturgy instructs the practitioner to dispassionately disassociate from the old body and take up the vantage point of the self-assured *ḍākinī*. She first compassionately regards the old body (the body down below that is freshly discarded and possessing warm flesh for those who prefer to consume it as such) as the basis of food, drink, and satisfaction of others; and then quickly descends to “cut” the body and prepare the feast for all beings to partake. On the other hand, the melody, in depicting the vultures’ willful reconnaissance over the freshly decomposing corpse, suggests that the practitioner continue to identify with the vulnerability of the exposed body and remains in some way attached to the vantage point of the old body. Since only the most expert practitioner is able to transcend visualizing the “transfer of consciousness” and actually accomplish this level of the practice, by exercising the play between these two possible vantage points, maintaining an experience of *either* vulnerability *or* confidence, the meditator may choose whichever way she finds most helpful to procuring realizations.

Thus, while the practitioner is, at the melodic level, imagining this scene of vultures arriving to feast off of the former body, the practitioner (seen as the *ḍākinī*) is instructed, by way of the written liturgy, to visualize acting like a vulture—to fly in circles above the old body and swoop down to cut it with the ritual knife. By utilizing the normally terrifying image of being picked away at by a vulture, the *Chöd* practitioner turns the situation of death into something with which to gain merit. While visualizing herself as the *ḍākinī*, the practitioner does this work of cutting, flaying, transforming, and intentionally distributing. The practitioner gives away what she can no longer use—this old body, which will be consumed in any event—and transforms this potentially traumatic moment into an opportunity for liberation of both self and others from cyclic existence (Skt. *saṃsāra*, Tib. *‘khor ba*).

#### *Musical Structures: Style and Character of Repeated Melodies and Rhythm*

Two continuously overlapping musical themes characterize the predominantly austere sound texture of the *Chöd sādhana*: a repeating rhythm played on the *ḍamaru* drum, and repeating melodies sung on top of this patterned underlay. The melodies occur in stanzas of visualized drama, which manifest poetically as thematic stanzas. The melodies function like the melodic (non-percussion-accompanied) *gur* in the repetition of the melody over several verses with different poetic content. The sweet, high-pitched ringing of the steadily ornamented bell is synchronized with the *ḍamaru*’s rhythm and props up the periodic calls from the thighbone trumpet. As well, the mantric utterance “*Phaṭ*” inflects the performance at key intervals,

particularly at sectional transitions between two melodies, and is meant to pacify spirits and overcome hindrances while distributing the body to others in visualization.<sup>62</sup> The practitioner recalls the ordinariness of the scene as far as the vultures are concerned and sees a body that has been left at the “sky-burial” site. Yet the powerful disconnect between the perspective of an aerial scavenger who seeks nourishment and the (beginner) practitioner who may not be ready to die is telling. The real enemy is neither “vultures” nor death itself, but the belief in the self as being simultaneously perishable with the body—the thought that the self is independent and self-sufficient.

#### *Summary of Music-Text Concordances*

1. This is the only section of the *sādhana* in which vultures are mentioned in the written liturgy.
2. Vultures are mentioned in the only section where vultures would assemble: during the meditation on “cutting the body” prior to the first (white) distribution.
3. The *ḍākinī* is visualized as imitating the vulture’s actions—“circling like a vulture above meat” (according to the written liturgy).
4. The *ḍākinī* is the practitioner herself (visualized as an enlightened form of a Buddha, having transferred her consciousness out and left the old body on the ground).
5. The melody is meant to depict an actual vulture’s wings flapping as it arrives at a sky-burial site (according to the oral tradition).
6. The imagery employed is consistent with the notion that in this tradition fear is aroused artistically, which cues terrifying imagery for the purpose of spiritual realization.

#### *Implications*

Based on the above and a host of related findings, the following may be suggested:

1. *Chöd* melodies are meant to be evocative of imagery.
2. Imagery is evoked musically when a melody is crafted through combining structural elements in accordance with the aesthetic logic of the tradition.
3. The imagery is appropriate to the *Chöd* theory in general.
4. The image-encoded melody is sung to a section of the written liturgy in which it enhances the affect and goal of that particular meditation section (e.g., vultures are mentioned only in the section in which the *ḍākinī*, the practitioner in visualization, sings of her actions being like theirs).

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<sup>62</sup> One *Chöd* teaching from the oral tradition advises the practitioner to imagine not one *ḍākinī*, but herself as a main central *ḍākinī* surrounded by a retinue of hundreds of thousands of *ḍākinīs* helping to do this work. The body is visualized as huge, so that no being in the universe will be left hungry or in need of anything (food, medicines, material comforts). Within this expansive visualization, the body is to be seen as transformed into all things desirable to and needed by others. Thus, a large retinue of assistants who can distribute all the parts of this transformed body throughout the universe can be visualized.

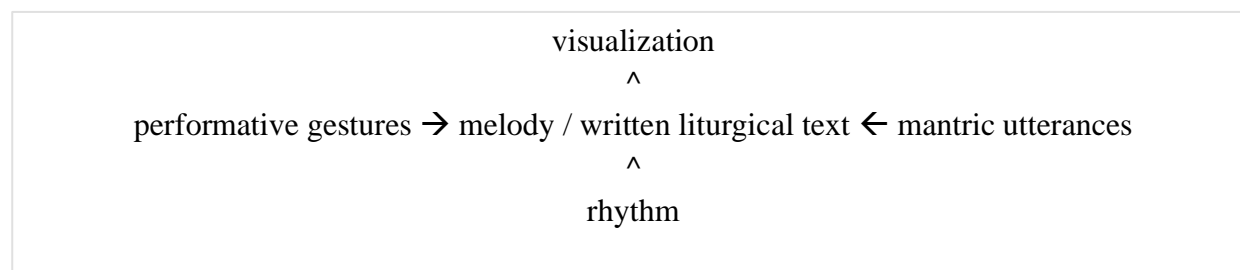
### “Ritual Mapping”: Analysis Technique for Buddhist Ritual Music Studies

Looking across these “texts” at multiple references to the image of vultures (which are designed to manifest during the practitioner’s most profound psychophysical transformation in the *sādhana*) provides a bridge across domains of meaning production and suggests the usefulness of “ritual mapping” as a way of conducting ritual analysis. Ritual mapping is the process I have employed for separating simultaneously occurring layers in a *sādhana* liturgy of precomposed melodies and poetry as performed during ritual practice. The evidence uncovered through my ethnographic interviews and musical analyses indicates that it is not words alone that cue the mental performance of visualization. The ritual analyst must layer the “text” of written liturgy against the structure, aesthetic design, and symbolism of the melody, and each of these against the intended musical imagery—as explained in the oral tradition’s commentary.

#### *The Primacy of Performance?*

There appears to be a primacy to the music when a *Chöd sādhana* is manifested in performance. The melody “carries” the written liturgy and sets the *rasa*, the mood or atmosphere. The music takes precedence in a way that defies easy analogy. The music feels important in a synesthetic sense; the poetic liturgy is “carried” through it, and thus meaning is conveyed simultaneously in at least two ways. The musical liturgy creates one mood-image, or *rasa* (lit. “taste”), during each subritual meditation, while the written liturgy is enveloped within the broader sonic iconography and describes specific meditations in the foreground.

*Figure 1: Ritual Elements Experienced During a Moment of Chöd Performance*



As we see in Figure 1, “melody” (as well as “mantric utterances”) is the expressive medium through which the liturgical text carries the visualization material. Therefore, the placement of melody (graphically) is close to “visualization,” on par with the written poetry.

Yet these levels may be misleading, for melody can be experienced simultaneously with visualization. Melody is capable of directly producing visualizations through the meaningful referents that inhere in the music, through the melodic tone contour of note-pairs in an ascending sequence of gestures and an authoritatively spoken symbolic attribution created and passed on by Machik Labdrön herself.

To assist in describing how these layers are related and function within the context of the *Chöd* ritual performance, each of these layers can be described and analyzed in turn and in

combination. In the *Chöd* ritual, the “written liturgical text” describes an ongoing continuous set of “visualizations”—poetically depicted instructions of what to mentally envision as the meditation practice proceeds. The liturgical text has been written in song-poem verse form, and since melody has pitch but is also inherently rhythmic, “rhythm” inheres in the melodic-poetic structure. Thus, while one rhythm undergirds the poetic text and visualizations, another is steadily maintained by the flow of the drum and bell.

*Musical Layer and Function: Rhythm*

The *damaru* drum’s “rhythm” is depicted in Figure 1 as underlying the entire ritual. This representation suggests that it is heard acoustically under the melody while enhancing it; the rhythmic ostinato supports the melody, but in quite different ways than the latter supports the text. The rhythm establishes the greatest constraint on the form, invariant in its insistent ostinato. Amid the negotiated space of our *Chöd* lessons—part traditional transmission, part ethnographic interview—I often asked whether the rhythmic ostinato is all-important to the efficacy of the practice. Silence was given as an answer, suggesting that it is a matter that can only be learned/known through the practitioner’s engaging in the practice. After some time, the rhythmic pattern becomes a deeply embodied, continuous motion that entrances the practitioner as it punctuates the text regularly on certain syllables in the metered verse.

As a percussive introduction into the flow of singing, the rhythmic ostinato commences with the accompaniment of vocables (spoken syllables) denoting the drum-beat pattern, “*ma-dang, lha-yi, khan-dro*” (*ma dang, lha yi, mkha’ gro* in Example 1)—a tradition drawn from the *bol* vocables in Indian classical music. The syllables are chanted aloud or silently to oneself at certain introductory sections. Gilbert Rouget notes that it has been suggested by some scholars that the constancy of a rhythm may also provide the physiological ground for a trance-like experience.<sup>63</sup> Biofeedback experts reveal that hearing repeated tones at certain speeds can put the brain into an alpha state, and a subject may be neurologically induced to go into trance. Although the rhythm in *Chöd* begins at a pace far slower than the tempo at which a trance would occur, a trance-like effect is likely experienced by the practitioner as the tempo gradually increases over the course of the hour-long performance. As the “ground,” or basis, for both an aural and a physical sense of continuity, rhythm is an ephemeral but constant element of the ritual. At the most esoteric level of *Chöd* practice, the advanced practitioners may experience a “falling away” such that “they may no longer hear the drum.” I was told that the highest-level practitioners, if they decide to eject the consciousness from the body, will “simply drop the drum completely.”<sup>64</sup> This is because there is no longer an embodied form (ritual practitioner) to do the work of instrumental performance. His or her consciousness has already been ejected out of the old body, traveling up through the crown chakra aperture of the top of the head and out into space, or into the guru-deity’s heart.

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<sup>63</sup> See Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>64</sup> Ven. Pencho Rabgey, personal communication, May 1998.

### *Performance, Competence, and Transcendence*

Let us return briefly to consider the stages of training in text and music performance in the *Chöd* transmission process. The dramaturgical narrative of a ritual operates like a script, as does the musical score. But meaningful inner transformation depends on the performer's authentic engagement with the material. The artistic process is not substantially different from the *Chöd* practitioner's initial artistic work—the mechanical skill building of playing ritual instruments, learning the performance utterances and vocal singing style—before reaching beyond the level of competence in musical ability to enter the art of meditation work. Musically guided tantric rituals, such as *Chöd*, appear as colorful song-poetry in their initial presentation, but the layers of performance, text, melody, and meditative visualization instruction may be skillfully revealed through the lama's instructions, and also, I argue, through the graphic representation of ritual mapping.

### **Conclusions: Musical Analysis in Buddhist Ritual Contexts**

The findings presented in this article suggest the possibility of removing the latent assumption that only the “written liturgical text” portion of the *sādhana* contains the meditative techniques and instructions that are meaningful for the practitioner's meditation performances. In other words, the finding of literary-musical correspondences indicates that the locus of meaning production is not in the *sādhana*'s poetry alone. Rather, interlinked “texts” (musical and literary) reference different aspects of the same meditative imagery in the context of performance. That the melodies of the *sādhana* complement the written liturgy in *some* functional capacity is practically unquestioned. What may be instructive for future research into *Chöd*, and by extension the *gur* and *Vajra Gīti* (Tib. *Rdo rje'i glu*) song-poem genres,<sup>65</sup> is understanding the degree to which Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual analysis may draw from several primary sources to learn the sum of the *sādhana*'s assigned meanings for the *Chöd* adept. Specifically, it draws from the *sādhana*'s written liturgy, the *sādhana*'s musical tradition, the written commentarial tradition, and the oral commentarial tradition. By considering all these sources, it may be possible to determine the *sādhana*'s assigned meanings for the *Chöd* adept's musical meditation. That is, by looking across the “texts” of music and written liturgy, it may be possible to read backwards, through the performance artifact (i.e., *sādhana*), to learn the scriptural and aural sources for the resultant tradition.

What is being attempted in ritual mapping is akin to the “thick description” process that is utilized in interpretive anthropology insofar as it is intended to privilege an understanding of ritual performance. Ritual mapping does not ignore matters of belief. Rather, it brackets the faith component concerning the matter of “divinely inspired” melodies—which are said to carry and invoke the Buddha's wisdom—in order to examine the compositional design of the *sādhana* with the analytical tools available. Why is it important to consider the *sādhana*'s design? In doing so,

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<sup>65</sup> See Lara Braitstein, “Saraha's Adamantine Songs: Texts, Contexts, Translations and Traditions of the Great Seal” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2006).

we may approach that which was originally intended for the *Chöd* meditator to experience; moreover, we may learn the value of formal design in Buddhist art and of the linked aspects of melody, visualization, written liturgy, and performative gesture in ritual performance.

It may be wondered whether musical tone painting is the primary symbolic way in which the melodies are to be understood as significant—that is, by virtue of the fact that they enhance a mood through the evocation of symbolic mental imagery. In fact, there are several additional ways in which the melody enhances and complements the text, which are detailed in my forthcoming book.<sup>66</sup>

Stephan Beyer’s insight that Buddhism is a performing art is relevant to this analysis. The gateway to fully understanding the design of a *Chöd sādhana* is generated, in large part, through performance. In addition, transcribing (i.e., “mapping”) the performance “texts” can further illuminate correspondences internal to a Buddhist ritual. As a caveat, it should be noted that while this article offers an initial prescription for analyzing Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual, it is not meant to be conclusive. Ritual mapping, as considered here, is a formalized way of making transparent the methodology and the analytical process undertaken that yield the findings described. Other researchers will no doubt follow different paths and uncover new insights.

Finally, we return to the meaning and purpose of *Chöd*. When experienced as a *practice*-centered performance, it is said to become a powerful method for achieving Buddhahood. The practitioner’s counter-intuitive orientation toward the suffering, experienced by all beings, is perhaps best summed up in the following historical parable: Machik Labdrön once asked her teacher, the Indian Buddhist mahāsiddhā Padampa Sangye (pha dam pa sangs rgyas, d. 1117), “How can I help sentient beings?” He replied:

Confess all your hidden faults.  
 Approach that which you find repulsive.  
 Whomever you think you cannot help, help them.  
 Anything that you are attached to, let go of it.  
 Go to places that scare you.  
 Sentient beings are limitless as the sky.  
 Be aware.  
 Find the Buddha inside yourself.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jeffrey W. Cupchik, ‘Ritual Mapping’ *The Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Ritual Practice of Machik Labdrön* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

<sup>67</sup> Kunpang Tsondu Senge, kun spangs btson ‘grus seng ge (13th century), *phungs po gzan skyur* [sic] *ba’i rnam par bshad pa las ma gcig lab sgron ma’i rnam par thar pa mdor msdus tsam zhig*, *The Concise Life Story of Machik Labdrön*, derived from *Exposition of Transforming the Aggregates into an Offering of Food: Illuminating the Meaning of Chöd*, *phung po gzan skyur* [sic] *rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byes* (f. 104), in Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2006), 131. For translation above, see Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2000), 181.

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