

# Chod: The Journey into Cutting the Self

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2023

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Social Anthropology with Visual Media

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates the religious experience of chod, a tantric Tibetan Buddhist practice, based on extensive ethnographic research in the Boudhanath area of Kathmandu, Nepal. Chod aims to help practitioners detach from the self through visualizations, sonic practices, and philosophical foundations. Through the medium of ethnographic documentary, the thesis explores the ways chod shapes perception and its impact on practitioners and the environment, aiming to provide an experiential journey that goes beyond mere representation. The chapters delve into the ritual practice of chod from the perspectives of practitioners at different expertise levels, as well as those involved in crafting ritual objects and monastic teachers. The thesis examines the historical development of chod, particularly its transition from a secretive practice to a public one, with a focus on the changes it has brought to the Boudhanath area. It analyses the production and visualization of chod-related images, alongside an exploration of the ritual and karmic economy. The significance of sonic practices is emphasized, arguing that the chants of chod possess explicit aesthetic value. The thesis employs concepts like sonic atmospheres and transduction to study the emotional layers evoked by the chod chants, highlighting their role in facilitating practitioners' detachment from emotions and the illusory self. Lastly, the thesis investigates the interplay between the invisible and the visible, exploring how film can transcend conceptual frameworks and enable viewers to experience chod in a realm beyond representation.

# Declaration

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# Acknowledgements

This thesis has been made possible due to the generous funding provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the kind and generous support of my supervisors, colleagues, friends and family.

I am extremely grateful to my research participants for opening the door for me to participate in their day-to-day life. Words cannot express my gratitude to Khenpo Orgen for his time dedicated to introducing me to the practice of chod and for sharing his wisdom. I am also thankful for the Mother's Group, Rangjung Yeshe Institute, and the Patan chod group.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisors Dr. Rupert Cox and Dr. Lorenzo Ferrarini for their guidance and continuous support for my PhD project. I am especially grateful to Dr. Rupert Cox, who has been the best supervisor one can ask for. His passion for anthropology, expertise and patience made this thesis possible.

I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends who read parts of my thesis and helped me to make sense of my ideas: Karen Sykes, Michelle Obeid, Sara Pozzi, Elena Borisova, Anna Balaz, Thomas Sullivan, Gabriel Camargo, Nada Abdulla, Ana Maria Radulescu and Alan Munro. Special thanks go to Jeremey Gunson for helping me make my writing flow. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Jhojan Ortiz for his support, encouragements and for being my companion in developing my ideas and discovering the world with new eyes.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Victor Vasile and Gabriela Vasile for their unconditional love, support and for believing in me.

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# Chapter: 1 Ethnographic context

*The first direct contact I had with Nepal was via the plane window. I arrived at the end of the monsoon season when floods covered most of the lower lands of Nepal. After the tragic landscape of flooded lands, we started to encounter the Himalayan Mountain range, a breathtaking view. I arrived in Kathmandu around 3 p.m. on the 13th of August 2017. The air outside the plane tasted sweet and dusty. The airport, a small brick building, looked timeworn, maybe it was 70-80 years old, but it was clean and well taken care of. I passed through security and customs quickly, and I went to meet my driver. He welcomed me with 'namaste' and a traditional khata.*

*The car was small and old; it looked like it might stop working at any moment. I was surprised to see how strong it was; some of the potholes on the road were as big as half of the wheel. If any European cars were used on the roads here, they would have broken in a few minutes. The road was full of holes and dust. The driver told me that the water supply in Kathmandu was not enough for the number of people living here, so they had to dig in the middle of the road and put in a new water pipe. Because the pipe had not been tested yet, they could not fix the roads. Traffic rules seemed to not exist in Kathmandu; in two lanes, one could find 5 cars and a few scooters, all driving at a maximum speed of 10-15 miles per hour.*

*The city had a welcoming air and a friendly atmosphere. We arrived at the guesthouse, and I was surprised by the amount of vegetation that surrounded the guesthouse. The garden was*

*green, with many flowers and small trees. A landscape that is not representative of Kathmandu, as most of the land had been built upon and trees and green spaces had been cut down to make space for apartments and shops.*

*My room was simple; it hosted two single beds and a bathroom. The guesthouse was part of Shechen Monastery, and it was well looked after. Breakfast was included, and it offered delicious but simple vegetarian dishes. The beds were comfortable. On the first night, I woke up at 4 a.m. due to my jet lag. At 5 a.m., I could hear the gong of the monastery waking up the monks. The locals also woke up with the gongs, and the sounds of the surroundings started to increase in intensity.*

*The next morning, I ventured outside the monastery. I walked around the street behind the monastery, and I came across a few craftsmen's workshops, where objects were crafted out of metal. I continued walking on the street, and a significant number of shops selling Buddhist items followed. Their windows advertised Buddhist sculptures of all sizes, drums, thangkas, and other ritual objects. The further I walked, the variety and volume of sounds in the area increased. I reached a point where I was asked to pay to go further. I asked why I had to pay, and I was told that this was 'for the stupa'. The closer I got to the stupa, the stronger the incense smell became. More and more people were chanting mantras and counting beads on their rosaries. I turned the corner, and the stupa revealed itself. I was overwhelmed. The structure, white and dome-shaped, was spectacular. The most surprising element was the top structure, golden in colour with painted blue eyes that seemed to be looking right at you. The roof was connected to the surrounding buildings by ropes made of thousands of Tibetan prayer flags. I followed the crowd, which was circumambulating the stupa clockwise, and I allowed myself to get lost in the meditative atmosphere. People of all ages, ethnic*

*backgrounds, tourists, or locals, Buddhists or belonging to other religious groups, marched in harmony around the stupa. I went around in circles a few times, admiring the surroundings, observing people's behaviour, and immersing myself in the sounds of Boudhanath Stupa.*

## **1. Setting the scene**

This thesis focuses on a community of chod (gCod translated from Tibetan as cutting) practitioners in the Boudhanath neighbourhood of Kathmandu, Nepal. Chod is a Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice that aims to help the practitioners to cut attachments from the self through a series of visualizations, chants, and introspections. The self, in Tibetan Buddhism, was seen by my informants as an illusion, one that allows a differentiation between I and the other, Due to this illusion, one may become attached to elements that are meant to be impermanent. Thus, one way to obtain liberation from suffering, is to cut the attachments one forms until one reaches a state of 'no self', or 'emptiness'.

I start my enquiry with a basic question: 'What is the nature of the religious experience of chod?'. From there I move towards an analysis of the processes of visualization involved in chod ritual practices. The thesis examines the images produced during these practices and their relationships to meditative states of consciousness, to different communities of practice (Gellner, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991), and to chod music via a visual anthropological methodology of making images (film, sound and photography) as well as studying them in the context an ethnographic documentary. Previous investigation on chod religious experience have focused on themes such as linguistics (Sheehy, 2005), shamanism and mysticism (Chaoul, 2009a; David-Neel, 1932), the gift of the body (Bernstein, 2013), rituals of death (Mumford, 1989), or music (Chong, 2011). This thesis ethnographically explores three areas



of research that have received little academic attention: the visualisation processes and image production, sonic atmospheres and transduction, and the ritual economies of chod. The first area of interest, the process of image production through visualisation, addresses the sensorial embodied experience of chod practitioners, with a focus on the ways of seeing and being in the world that result from their engagement with the practice. The second area of interest, the ritual economies of chod, explores the wider social, political and economic developments in the Boudhanath area in terms of monastic economics and cultures, development, tourism, and local business in relation to chod practice. Before detailing the three main themes explored in the thesis, I provide the reader with an introduction to the practice and the field site and introduce my informants. The third area of interest focuses on particular ways of listening and how the music of chod is constructed as a support for the visualisation process.

The thesis makes a number of significant contributions to anthropological knowledge. Firstly, it increases the ethnographic knowledge of chod and Tibetan Buddhism in the area of Boudhanath at a time when chod is becoming particularly popular in Kathmandu as well as internationally. Here, I build on existing ethnographic research by responding to present arguments in the field and focusing attention on the ritual practice of chod and its integration in the wider political, economic, and social context.

Secondly, the thesis furthers our understanding of the anthropology of Nepal and Tibetan Buddhism by providing an in-depth focus on the context of how chod developed in this area over time and the specificities of how chod is practiced in Kathmandu by a combination of foreigners, local Nepalis and Tibetans, as well as Tibetan refugees who settled in Kathmandu after the invasion of Tibet by China.

Thirdly, I make a contribution to visual anthropology by developing theories of seeing through an in-depth study of practices of visualization, image creation, and by making images to study images. Alongside vision, I expand on theories of sonic atmospheres and transduction and reflect critically on how the sounds of the chod practice were constructed through influences of the rasa theory. Furthermore, I combine sight and hearing in the making of a documentary, using film to move towards an experience beyond representation. I do this by building on arguments made by Buddhist-themed films that aim to create an experience that moves beyond representation and by drawing upon existing literature, such as theories of representation based on ontological emptiness. Finally, I engage with theories of montage and editing to explore the visible-non-visible dichotomy.

The thesis follows the structure of how fieldwork developed. Initially, when I arrived in Kathmandu, I familiarized myself with the context and started networking to learn more about the practices performed in Boudhanath, as well as the different religious institutions. Once I met Yeshe, my main informant, I began learning about Buddhism, and I was asked to build an altar and purchase a few thangkas and some of the chod ritual objects. This translated into my third chapter, an inquiry into the ritual economy of chod. After the brief introduction to Buddhism, Yeshe introduced me to my first visualization practice. I initially learned to visualize the image of the Buddha. Thus, my fourth chapter focuses on the process of visualizations and the learning processes involved. The fifth chapter is focused on sound practices, the next element introduced by Yeshe. I learned to chant and play the chod

instruments before delving deeper into the practice. While one might argue that combining the two senses, sight and hearing, would have provoked richer contrasts, I decided to analyse them separately based on how knowledge unfolded in the field and based on the way my teacher structured his teachings. However, the last chapter brings these two aspects together through the medium of cinema.

The final chapter, focused on film, provides the reader with an enriched perspective on the practice of chod. It is a move towards creating an experience that goes beyond representation. Through the process of filmmaking, I explored the practice of chod through the senses and focused on how my informants and I experienced chod. Film, in this context, served as the medium that helped me explore a dimension of chod that was challenging to convey through writing, a dimension of experience that transcends language and representation.

### **1.1 An introduction to chod practice**

The practice of chod emerged in 11th century Tibet, and it was developed by the female philosopher Machik Labdron (1055-1149) with influences from Padampa Sangye, an Indian yogi (Sorensen, 2013). Chod is a Tibetan Buddhist practice rooted in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Sorensen (2013) argues it is the only practice that travelled from Tibet to India. Chod is the only known Buddhist practice developed by a woman that is still practiced today. While Chod has increased in popularity over time, it has never achieved an independent status as a school of thought in Tibetan Buddhism, and it has always been linked to the monastic

community and the lineages (schools of thought) out of which it developed – predominantly the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages. A special case could be made for chod practitioners who live independently from monastic organisations. Yet even in these cases, the chopas (chod practitioners) need to follow a specific teacher (lama) for guidance.

Chod has traditionally formed part of the Dzogchen tradition (great perfection), and is characterised by a set of tantric practices, secret to non-initiated monks or lay people. Today chod is pushing the boundaries of secrecy and practice and has been made publicly accessible to a larger population (Buddhist and non-Buddhist), although it still retains many secretive aspects that only few practitioners have access to. For the past fifteen years, chod has become popular outside the Buddhist communities in India, Nepal and Tibet. This is in part due to Tibetan lamas traveling outside Southeast Asia (to Europe, the Americas, or China) and offering teachings on the practice, as well as an overall increase in the number of Buddhist practitioners in Europe and Americas (PEW survey, 2012), a surge in popularity of practices such as mindfulness and compassion meditations (Desbordes et al., 2012), and a growing medical and neuroscience interest in Buddhist meditation (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Fox et al., 2016).

Chod (tib. gCod) is a Tibetan word that translates as ‘to cut/to sever’ or ‘cutting/severance’. The method takes a variety of forms that aim to help the practitioner realise ‘the self’ (tib. rang) by becoming aware of the attachments to the ego or self-grasping and cutting these attachments and mental fluctuations in an attempt to address emotional unsettledness and

thereby obtain 'emptiness' (tib. Stong pa nyid) (Sheehy, 2005). Emptiness in the Tibetan sense, as described by the Dalai Lama (T. Gyatso, 2015), does not refer to a reality that is inherently empty, but rather, to 'the true nature of things' and to a state of mind that colloquially is referred to as 'enlightenment'. To obtain emptiness means to be awake, in the sense of how the Buddha awoke. At times emptiness is also compared to awareness (skr. Sunyata, translated as empty essence of a luminous nature) (T. Gyatso, 2015). According to Harding's (2003) translation notes, the philosophical underpinning of chod and its relationship with emptiness is rooted in the main texts (sadhana) of Tibetan Buddhism, the Prajnaparamita (trans. Perfection of Wisdom collection of texts) and Tantras (a higher order of Buddhist practices available only for highly trained practitioners). Chod practices are predominantly found in the Kagyu or Nyingma Buddhist lineages, at times in the Gelug lineage, and in the Bon Tradition of Tibet (Bon is a spiritual tradition that pre-dates Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet) (Sorensen, 2013).

At its root, chod is a meditation practice, where chopas (chod practitioners) sit cross legged and chant the text of chod while visualising the images depicted in the text and playing musical instruments such as a damaru (drum), a kangling (bone trumpet) or a dril bu (bell). Chod may involve a combination of visualisation practices: practices of ejecting one's consciousness out of the body, visualisations of becoming a fearful deity, dances, meditation, mantra recitation, music-making, physical offerings of food/goods/money, chanting, and mudras (hand movements), as well as theoretical/philosophical explorations (Chaoul, 2009a; Sheehy, 2005). Chod may be practiced in groups or individually, by monks or lay people, in homes, monasteries, chod centres, retreat centres, cremation/charnel grounds (known as

dangerous places), jungles/forests, road intersections, rushing rivers, mountain peaks, or caves (Lang, 2017). According to their level of practice, practitioners usually wear a type of tantric cloth in either pink/white or white and burgundy, depending on the type of chod they practice. Some advanced practitioners, regarded as chopas yogis (yogi chod practitioners), wear specific attire in white and burgundy, or just white. The colours and materials used in chod vestments and practice are often different from place to place. Depending on the practice and the practitioner, various types of ritual objects are used. Some of the most important elements are: a drum (damaru), a bell (dril bu), a human femur trumpet (kangling), a dorje (vajra), texts, pictures of deities (thangkas) and Tibetan teachers, an altar, statues, flour edifices, alcohol, and flowers.

In order for one to become a chopas (chod practitioner), one must be a Buddhist or become one through an initiatory ritual of 'taking refuge' in the three jewels of Tibetan Buddhism, Buddha-Dharma-Sanga, and by placing faith in the teachings of the Buddha. Buddha represents the fully enlightened one, the Dharma represents the teachings of the Buddha, and the Sanga is the monastic and lay community that practice Dharma. After taking refuge, one must develop an awakened mind. According to teachings in the Dzogchen tradition, chod or any high practice, is usually recommended by the practitioner's lama when they believe the initiated is ready to practice Vajrayana (trans. 'the diamond vehicle' or associated with the tantric path, the highest form of Buddhism after Theravada and Mahayana) (Ray, 2002). Tibetan Buddhists consider the tantric path to be potentially as beneficial as it is dangerous, because many of its approaches and philosophies may be inappropriate if the practitioner does not fully understand them or does not know how to practice them. Once one has the

approval of the lama, empowerment (wang) is needed from a high teacher (usually a Rinpoche or a lineage holder or head of the school), as well as an oral transmission to initiate the new practitioner (G. K. Gyatso, 1995). Those that offer empowerment must belong to an uninterrupted lineage from the time of the Buddha, and they must also perform an oral or aural transmission (recitation of lineage texts) alongside the other ritual elements. After empowerment, one must be taught the philosophy behind chod and, if needed, how to play instruments, chant, visualise, and dance (only attributed to certain traditions of chod). A lama must always supervise the development of the chopa and guide him or her on the path.

Whereas most Tibetan Buddhist practices, especially the Vajrayana practices, are carried out by monks in a monastery setting, chod became popular amongst lay people (especially amongst women) because it could be performed together with the monastic community and in small groups or individually without a lama (Bernstein, 2013). Another reason for the increased popularity of chod are the different levels of practice available to beginners as well as highly trained Buddhists. At the incipient stage one is required to know how to play the instruments and follow the chants. At this stage it is recommended that the practitioner immerses themselves into the philosophy behind the practice and that they learn to visualise. Some of the visualisations performed may include ejecting consciousness out of the body, transforming it into the rainbow body of the main chod deity (Krodikali), cutting the body into pieces, or making a soup from the body and offering it as a feast to Buddhas, demons, or other sentient beings. Other stages may include advanced visualisations and philosophical underpinnings combined with advanced introspection into the attachments one has to the self and the body. Advanced practitioners are required to start practicing in charnel grounds

(Tib. Dur khrod – which traditionally refers to the place where vultures eat the flesh of the deceased also known as a Sky Burial), and some of them are required to visit 108 cremation grounds and practice in each for a number of days, depending on instruction from their respective lamas (David-Neel, 1932, p. 152). Development along the path of chod goes hand in hand with processes of self-transformation and higher levels of understanding of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Once the chopa has reached a high level of understanding, he or she is required to learn to unlearn, to de-intellectualise the practice and transcend the conceptual barrier into a higher stage, primarily focused on experience (for an analysis of this in Vajrayana Dzogchen practices, see Dorje and Thayé, 2007). This is a mode of moving from logic into experience that lies beyond representation. The practice increases in difficulty and meaning, but these parts are considered secret and as such I do not address them in the thesis. This is primary due to my teacher's instructions.

## **1.2 An introduction to the field**

This thesis is the result of 13 months of fieldwork in Boudhanath, as well as occasional visits to a temple in Patan. Boudhanath, or Boudha, is a neighbourhood in the east of Kathmandu, Nepal. Patan (or Latipur), is the third largest city in the country and it neighbours Kathmandu to the south. Boudhanath is famous for the Great Stupa of Boudhanath, which is a World Heritage UNESCO site that dates from between 2<sup>nd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century CE. While the Great Stupa (tib. Choden) has always been an important Buddhist pilgrimage site, the area became more popular after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s. Many Tibetan refugees left Tibet and were granted permission by the Nepali Government to settle in Boudhanath. At the time, the



area was populated by a small group of Tamangs, an ethnic group who are/were the care takers of the stupa. The area now is the home to over 60 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries (although locals estimate the number to be over 100), and a variety of restaurants, hotels and businesses that trade in Buddhist ritual objects, such as statues and deity paintings; or provide services, such as meditation retreats, travel and health services.



Fig 1.1 Boudhanath in the 1950s <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An aerial view of the Boudha stupa in the 1950s. Photo: Tony Hagen



Fig 1.2 Boudhanath in 2017<sup>2</sup>

Following the Tibetan migration to the area, the population of Boudhanath has grown rapidly, along with the construction of monasteries, a number and variety of businesses and tourism, all of which have contributed to the development of the region. Peter Moran (2010) writes of Boudhanath and the rapid development of Buddhist establishments in the period between 1993-1994, painting a picture of Boudhanath which is complemented by an exoticized sense of a spiritual community conveyed in Bertolucci's film *Little Buddha* (1993). At the time of Bertolucci's film, Boudhanath was home to 24 monasteries, two guesthouses, and a few

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<sup>2</sup> An aerial view of the Boudha Stupa in 2017. Photo: Floran Wizorek

restaurants. By the time I arrived in the field (2017-2018), the landscape had changed drastically. There are many more monasteries, the area is overpopulated, and it is now home to a multitude of hotels and restaurants, from modest to five-star establishments. The rapid economic development of the area is evident in the number of businesses that flood the main streets of Boudhanath. Moran (2010) details the changes that monasteries and the monastics have undergone while adapting from Tibet to Boudhanath. Some of these changes include the loss of economical capital for monasteries (for some monasteries) and their adaptation to a market-based economy, the changing roles of monastic leaders from teachers to fundraisers, as well as the choice for monks to perform services outside the monastery to live a more comfortable life outside the basic conditions in the monastery. While these social, political and economic changes will be addressed in the next chapter, here I pose the following question: if the administrative and economic models of monasteries changed rapidly when the Tibetan refugees migrated to Nepal, what can be said about the practice of Buddhism itself? One may wonder if these changes affected the practice of Buddhism as well as its philosophy, ways of teaching, the secrecy of the tantric path, as well as the production and distribution of ritual objects. The same can also be asked about the ways these changes affected the residents of Boudhanath and their relation to Buddhism, the monasteries, and the monastics.

I started my journey in Nepal by enrolling onto a Tibetan language course for six months at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute (trans. self-arising wisdom institute) Centre for Buddhist studies, part of the Ka-Nying Shedrub monastery. The monastery is a monk only establishment and it belongs to the combined Kagyu-Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery was

built between 1974-1976, and since the 1990s it has grown considerably. Today it is the gateway to Buddhism and Himalayan languages for most foreigners in Boudhanath. The leader of the monastery is Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, son of the founder of the monastery, Toku Urgyen Rinpoche. The monastery has a number of satellite monasteries or centres: three in Nepal, one in Tibet and ten in Europe, North America and Asia. The Rangjung Yeshe Institute (RYI) hosts approximately 110 non-Nepali students per academic year and 120 during the summer classes. RYI provides a high source of income for the monastery, as well as for the local community of Nepali and Tibetans that work for the institution. The fees for non-Nepalis at RYI are comparable to those at US and UK universities. The high presence of foreigners in the area has pushed rent up and created an industry of restaurants, hotels, goods, and cafes adapted to 'westerners' (tib. ingi) as the locals call all non-South Asian people. The term was initially used to refer to English foreigners in Tibet, and it has since been used to refer to all foreigners regardless of their origin. In the context of the thesis I will use the word Westerner or 'Ingi' as per my informants' understanding.

### **1.3 Meeting the chopas**

I met Yeshe, my main informant and mentor, on my first day at RYI. Ven. Khenpo Yeshe is a teacher and scholar of the Dudjom Tersar lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Starting in his youth, Khenpo trained as a monk at Samye Memorial Institute in Kathmandu under the guidance of H. E. Yeshe Sangpo Rinpoche. There, he completed sutra and tantra studies according to the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and achieved his Khenpo title. For the past 15 years, Khenpo has been teaching monastics at the institute, primarily in higher tantras and classical texts. From 1994 to 2005, he studied outer and inner tantras and The Great Perfection. From

2005 to 2011, he completed a number of traditional retreats devoted to preliminary practices (ngondro) and the main practices of the creation and completion stages of The Great Perfection (Yeshe Lama, the heart instruction text by Jigme Lingpa on the Great Perfection of Longchen Nyingthik tradition). Based in the Dudjom lineage, Khenpo's main teachers are H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, H.H. Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and H.E. Yeshe Sangpo Rinpoche. Khenpo is connected to many teachers within the pure lineages of old and new schools of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Nyingthik tradition of Great Perfection through H.H. Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche. After years of service, H.E. Yeshe Sangpo Rinpoche has given Khenpo permission to teach Buddhadharma publicly as a Dudjom lineage holder.

Khenpo's ancestors belong to the indigenous Himalayan group of people who travelled across the higher Himalayas of Nepal, India, and Bhutan from the early 6th to the 14th century CE, originating from the royal clans of the Tibetan kings Nya-Tri-Tsenpo, Lha Lama Od, Shiva Od, and others. Among them, Khenpo's family came from western Tibet, Ngari-Kor-Sum, bordered on the western part of Nepal by Mt. Kailash of Tibet, which has profound influences on the founding treasures of the spiritual world. Many chod practitioners practice around the Kailash region, from ancient times to the present day. One of these indigenous groups, called Mugum, inhabited the Mugu valley of western Nepal, from which Khenpo's family originated. Khenpo's parents moved to India in the 1960s and lived there for a long time. Currently, they are residents of Kathmandu. Khenpo is the only monk and the youngest of his parents' three children. His parents are very religious and strictly follow the spiritual path as Buddhist practitioners.

Khenpo's connection to the practice of chod started when he was young. When Khenpo was four years old, he travelled to the Himalayan valleys of Garsha, Lahul, India with his parents on a pilgrimage in the early 80s. Khenpo told me, "My mum used to tell me a story - I fell terribly sick at that time and got caught by a demon when they were just passing through an old rope bridge, well known for its paranormal stories of spirits. I suddenly became sick, my mouth shut, teeth chattering, became unconscious and could not hear or move. My parents became very horrified and cried. They took me back to the tent and called a monk (Tibetan yogi) who was living in a tent close by for help. This yogi, later I knew was a chod practitioner, came to our tent, held the instrument, and performed chod over me. I then immediately came back to consciousness and healed. That was my first encounter with chod in my whole life. A couple of years later, I joined the monastery and was completely touched by the melody of chod being practiced in the shrine hall. Chod brought many blessings to my life. I learned the melody of Krodikali chod from my very kind teacher Khenpo Pema Rigzin, who passed away in the early 2000s before I graduated. He is my main chod teacher." Later, Khenpo received the entire teachings of empowerment and instructions of the lineage cycle mainly from H.H. Thinley Norbu and H.H. Dudjom III Sange Pema Shepa, along with other masters, and began to practice in retreat for many years.

After being appointed as a Dudjom lineage holder, Khenpo expanded his teaching to include laypeople from across Asia, Europe, and the United States. From his home in Kathmandu, he teaches online and in person in both Tibetan and English. Khenpo is currently guiding his sangha in accumulating 100 million Green Tara mantras for the benefit of sentient beings during these challenging times.

Yeshe came to RYI to deepen his understanding of Sanskrit. He introduced me to the practice of Krodikali chod (named after the main deity it follows – Throma Nagpo or Krodikali) and became my main gatekeeper in Boudhanath. Yeshe introduced me to the founder of the Throma chod practice, H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, who is considered the 3rd reincarnation of Dudjom Lingpa Rinpoche – the first supreme head of the Nyingma lineage. Yeshe offered me detailed explanations of the Throma chod text, taught me how to use chod instruments, how to chant, and how to visualize, as well as the philosophy behind chod and how to apply it in daily life. Methodologically, I consider my relationship with Yeshe a master-apprentice relationship (Grasseni, 2004; Lave, 1997; Weidman, 2012). With his help, I was initiated into chod via the ceremony of empowerment (Tib. Wang – to empower something), and this opened doors for me to talk to masters, interview practitioners, join group and individual practices, as well as to obtain access to the process of manufacturing chod ritual objects. The knowledge I obtained as a result of our master-apprentice relationship was through learning: by doing, studying, observing, filming, and drawing, as well as through perceptual interactions developed and cultivated in the apt surroundings of Boudhanath. Through these ways of seeing, hearing, and knowing, chod revealed itself in different aspects of practice and society, pushing me to explore a multitude of perspectives and nuances to gain an understanding of the practice situated in the wider social, economic, and political landscape.

Khenpo Yeshe, in this context, became more than a teacher; he became my collaborator and research partner. The structure of my research, together with the film and my own personal Buddhist development, was heavily shaped by Yeshe. From the first day at Rangjung Yeshe Institute, my teacher was interested in learning more about how I intended to study a tantric

practice, and while he was keen to help, he took careful steps to see if my interests were genuine. My initial research proposal before coming to the field was focused on studying the practice of deity yoga, but I quickly learned that it was not a topic the monks or other people were interested in discussing. I discovered chod after a few weeks at RYI when a group practice took place in the main hall of the monastery, and I felt drawn to listen. I asked my colleagues about the practice, and once I learned about the visualization elements, I became interested and wanted to learn more. At this point, Yeshe decided to be my teacher and started teaching me the basics of Tibetan Buddhism. Since I had not taken refuge at the time, Yeshe did not go into too much detail about chod, but he gave me an overview of the practice. I kindly asked him if he would be interested in teaching me and helping me study the practice, and our collaboration began. Yeshe made a detailed plan on how I could learn the practice and what I needed to know beforehand. For example, he was keen for me to take refuge and receive empowerment to practice chod from Dudjom Rinpoche the 3rd, who happened to be visiting Kathmandu and offering chod empowerments in a few weeks' time. We set up a lesson plan, and Yeshe came to my house twice a week to teach me. For his teachings, we agreed that I would make offerings to him. Initially, he did not want to tell me how much to offer, but after a few discussions, we agreed on an amount of 15,000 rupees (150 US dollars) for the equivalent of three months of teachings, followed by four more payments three months apart. Alongside my offerings for teachings, I occasionally made other offerings to Yeshe on days when we attended an event together, such as a chod puja, when he helped me with filming, or when we went to interview chopas. The act of making offerings to a lama is common in the area of Bouddhanat, and it is encouraged. Besides our classes, we often went out for tea or dinner to chat, hang out, or visit different monasteries in the area. During the



13 months I spent in Kathmandu, Yeshe became one of my closest friends, and this thesis would not have been possible without his knowledge and input. I see this thesis as a collaborative practice, and while he did not help me write it per se, his input and knowledge make this collaborative research.

Khenpo Yeshe's trust in me and his high education and high respect in the community helped me gain access to key areas for my research. At my request, Yeshe introduced me to a chod centre, he convinced the master of a thangka school to allow me to observe and learn the art of painting, as well introducing me to producers of chod musical instruments and ritual objects, such as the damaru, the kangling, and ritual offering cakes. Through these introductions, I also gained access to other chod groups, such as the RYI's student chod group, Ka-Nying Shedrub monthly chod, the Patan group, as well as access to individual practitioners. I was offered access to a chod group established in the Sherpa community (a Tibetan ethnic group), Khachyod Sangechenling Mother's Throma Foundation, or simply 'the Mother's group', led by Khenpo Pema. The mother's group became the chod practice group that I attended the most and where I conducted most of my research, filming, and interviews. At the time of my fieldwork, this was the only dedicated chod group with a centre built for this purpose and with bi-monthly group practices (chod is commonly practiced once a month in a group setting). While writing this thesis, one of my informants, choppa Tenzin, opened a second centre dedicated to the learning and practice of chod. The mother's groups practice is entitled 'From the Treasury of Basic Space of Dharmata: The 'Wisdom Sun' Sadhana of the One Mother, Troma Nagmo' (the practice also goes by the name "new treasure"), or simply Throma chod.

Understood through the lenses of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the Mother's group can be understood as a group that comes together to share a religious experience, practice chod, socialise, and enhance their Buddhist knowledge, but also to reinforce an individual practitioner's social status. The main purpose of my involvement with the Mother's group was to learn about the religious experience of chod in a group and to represent the practitioners' views in an ethnographic film format. According to Paradise & Rogoff (2009), the following types of learning in a community of practice can be identified: learning by doing and participating, learning by observation, learning by self-practice, and learning with the camera. Learning, as an ethnographic practice, consists of a mode of immersion into the community as well as becoming a person rooted in a hierarchy of values and norms (Bryant, 2005). By immersing myself into the community of practice at the Mother's group I developed skilled vision similar to the way Grasseni (2004) did during her research as an apprentice to a cattle breeder. In Grasseni's view, skilled vision is understood 'not as a disembodied 'overview' from nowhere, but as a capacity to look in a certain way as a result of training' (Grasseni 2004, p 41). In my case, I developed this skilled vision through learning with the camera and in making my ethnographic film. Skilled vision allowed me to explore chod via the ways of seeing shared by the community, to understand what elements are central when chod is practiced in a group rather than in an individual setting, as well as helping me to develop an aesthetic mode of representation rooted in the display of the practice, the rhythm, the musicality, and the movements of the ritual in the context of the Mother's group. Following Belting (2011), I propose that the act of learning makes the body a technology and medium of seeing in a community. In Belting's (2011) view, images are

embedded with a distinctiveness that extends 'the boundary between physical and mental existence'. In his view, bodies are seen as living mediums, and not as host mediums. Thus, they are transfer points for the material itself, closing in this way the gap between mental images and images existing in the world, becoming in this case aspects of each other. The existence of an image is then defined as a continuous interaction between one's consciousness and the physical domain. Here I ask: where are the visualisations of chod created, sustained, and ended? Do images have agency or is agency created at the intersection of the image and the body?

Outside the chod communities of practice, I conducted fieldwork in a Tibetan thangka painting school – the Tsering School at Shechen Monastery. The school belongs to the Karma Gadri style of painting, and its primary aim is to teach monks and local students the art of thangka painting. To become a thangka painter one needs to finish six years of training in the school, followed by two years in the specialized monastery workshop. My three months of fieldwork in the school may not have been sufficient to develop the necessary skills to become an accomplished painter, but they certainly helped me get to know the field site and the ways of seeing involved in making deity images. The time spent in the school allowed me to further develop my skilled vision and gain insight into how thangkas are made, the philosophy behind them, the attitude of the painters towards the images, as well as the ways of seeing colours and shapes in this artform. The art school followed a precise rhythm and offered no room for creating imperfect artwork. The method of teaching was constant repetition until reaching perfection. I was given a wooden board which I would cover with a thin layer of butter and white chalk powder, and I was asked to create the same image, a leaf for example, until it was

perfect, even if this took days or weeks to complete. I realised that the act of copying to perfection was the base of the thangka art form. The artist has very little room for creating outside a copy, aside from painting the landscape behind the deity. Ingold (2011) suggests that the act of imitation is a process of constant attuning to the copy, through both feeling and thinking with the body. The act of learning expands from the making of the craft itself into developing awareness (Ingold, 2018).

I realised that studying with the practitioners and the painters may not have been enough to understand the religious experience of chod and to develop a skilled vision. Chod is one of the few Tibetan Buddhist practices where ritual music is made by the practitioner. In chod, the act of seeing is strongly linked to the act of listening as well as marking the rhythm and ways of moving. In this thesis I argue that these are all embodied aspects of one another, meaning that they should be studied in relationship to one another. After a few failed attempts to talk to shop owners and damaru and kangling makers, I asked Khenpo Yeshe to help me to gain access to their workshops. While gaining access to a damaru workshop was easier, finding a master willing to talk me through the making of the bone trumpet was complicated. The making of bone kanglings are forbidden by law, and if caught the masters could be jailed for up to three years. The workshops are illegal because the transport and craft of human bones is an illegal activity. Even so, most of Vajrayana practices in Tibetan Buddhism rely on such objects, and objects like kapalas (skull-cup), made from human skulls, are on display in monasteries. Gaining access to a kangling workshop posed ethical challenges, both in terms of my position as a researcher studying craftsmen that work with human remains, as well as the risks the camera posed due to the possible identification of my informant. To make

sure I keep my informant safe, I discussed with him beforehand and agreed on what would be the best way for him to feel safe. To protect the identity of the craftsman I did not include his face in the film nor did I identify him by name.

I conducted fieldwork in two workshops – a process which helped me understand how to make a ‘good sound’, what a good sound represents and how it can aid practice, as well as to understand the philosophy behind the musical instruments and their role in the practice. My experience in the workshops was important for me to be able to link the sound of chod to the ritual text and visualisations. Cupchik (2015) suggests that chod music is not just an accompaniment to the text, but a primary aesthetic that aids the practitioner in developing specific emotional and visual states that lead to meditative discernments. The process of making instruments is similar to the process of painting, and creative freedom is limited to the design and fabrication of ornaments and decorations. Each instrument needs to be tuned to create a ‘good sound’, a definition that is subjective and based on the evaluation of each chopa. In trying out a variety of instruments, I realised that each damaru or kangling produced a different sound, both in terms of the notes created as well as the texture of the sound. Nonetheless, according to the chopa, they all produced ‘good sounds’.

My time with the two craftsmen allowed me to see the economic aspects of instrument production. The damaru maker, Ananada, reported an exponential increase in yearly earnings over the last seven years, due to the increasing popularity of the practice. Ananada had relocated to a bigger workshop twice, and planned to rent a more central and bigger shop in

the future to adapt to the demands of the market. During my stay in Boudhanath, at least four new chod related instruments shops opened. In comparison the kangling maker, Lhamo, reported a modest increase in business, and this correlated with the forbidden and secret aspect of his craft and the high price of his products. None of the shops I visited sold bone kanglings, but I was made aware that I could get one if I was serious and ready to pay a high price.

All in all, the different field sites I explored during my stay in Nepal, such as Tibetan language classes, group chod practices, individual practices, my apprenticeship to a master, deity painting classes, damaru and kangling workshops, as well as my explorations around the Boudhanath area with its high number of monasteries and Dharma related businesses, offered me a privileged inside view on what chod is and means for each sector of practitioners or craftsmen related to the practice.

#### **1.4 Positionality and limitations**

The thesis has several limitations, and while some of them can be overcome in future research, others were more difficult to address. One of the main limitations was linguistic. I started learning Tibetan in the field, and I soon realized that my ethnographic encounters would have been more meaningful if I were proficient in classical and colloquial Tibetan. My language training consisted of six months of classical and colloquial Tibetan at Rangjung Yeshe Institute in Kathmandu (more details about this will be provided later). Before fieldwork, I had a limited understanding of the Tibetan alphabet. The language course introduced me to the

Tibetan way of thinking and provided me with some working knowledge of the language. I was able to conduct casual conversations and get by in the area of Boudhanath, but it did not provide me with a comprehensive understanding of the nuances of the language or the capability of using and translating primary texts at an academic level. This would have been useful as a primary text analysis would have enriched my knowledge of chod and developed my understanding of the context of the practice. To overcome this limitation, I read translated texts and engaged with existing literature in the field of Buddhist Studies. My limited knowledge of Tibetan also proved challenging when I was conducting interviews with native Tibetans as I could not fully understand them, and I sometimes found it hard to understand specific accents or regional dialects. My main informant, Yeshe, helped me with translations and guided me through the nuances of the Tibetan language that I was not aware of.

Another way I partially addressed these limitations was by understanding how they positioned me in the field. For example, I paid careful attention to how the Tibetan language is taught and how Buddhist philosophy is translated into language. Another limitation was my personal short-term engagement with Buddhism. While I studied Buddhism for three years before I started fieldwork, a more advanced level of understanding and practice would have taken me to a deeper level of chod and tantra. I spent the first part of my fieldwork learning about the basics of Buddhism, and I received empowerment to practice Buddhism and chod specifically. While this has proven to be an invaluable ethnographic experience and helped me learn how one is initiated in Tibetan Buddhism and tantra, I would have liked to start my fieldwork with a deeper understanding of Vajrayana practices to be able to gain more in-depth knowledge of tantra and chod. A personal experience in Tantra would have also

helped me to guide and focus my research more on aspects of Buddhism that only came to my knowledge towards the end of my fieldwork and some even after fieldwork. However, learning chod as a total beginner has been eye-opening, and it helped me ethnographically document the process of learning chod as a beginner. Even as an inexperienced Buddhist, I ethnographically explored how monks teach Buddhism, how others learn it, and how Buddhism affected me on a sensorial level.

Furthermore, my own background as a predominantly white (with mixed Gypsy background), middle-class, and educated European who came to Nepal to study Buddhism had its limitations in the eyes of my informants. I was perceived as someone with money who had an easy life. This meant that often my informants expected me to provide gifts or money. My main informants sometimes expected to be taken to nice places for lunch or tea, while others, like my Tibetan language teacher, expected me to pay more money for private classes than the regular price. The perception of being European and having money was also part of the collective imagination of shopkeepers, taxi drivers, or local service providers (i.e., laundry cleaners) who usually started to charge me four times the usual price, and I had to constantly negotiate to lower the price. Thus, I had to constantly negotiate my stay in Kathmandu, from the rent I was paying to the food prices, Buddhist ritual objects, travel, and vegetable prices. Other limitations were related to the complications of shooting a film by myself. Often, full production teams work on a documentary, while in this case, I had to conduct interviews, film, and record sound all by myself. The limitations of making a film by myself were alleviated through my previous experience of making films and by engaging with my informants through a collaborative approach.



## 1.5 Filmmaking in the field

When I started filming, I knew I did not want to script the film or "set it up" in any particular way. I preferred to discover the purpose of the images while capturing them. I let myself be guided by the camera, documenting the events unfolding around me, my informants' perspectives, and the wider environment of Boudhanath. MacDougall (2019, p. 7), in his essays on filmmaking and anthropology, argues that cameras impose special ways of engaging with the world, and these often force filmmakers to step outside themselves and adopt intermediate positions, not knowing the outcome. These changes in behaviour produce changes in perception and sometimes new kinds of knowledge.

In the first few months of fieldwork, apart from one exception, I did not film anything. I wanted to accustom my ways of seeing to the place and to learn what is important for my informants before trying to capture any of it on film. I combined my previous experiences of filming and handling the camera with the new skilled visions I developed through mimesis, learning chod, and embedding myself in Boudhanath society. To see differently, I allowed myself to "get lost" in the field. The act of learning with the camera changed my perception of what chod is. For example, the mimetic act of sitting cross-legged, like my informants, pushed me to film from a much lower position than I would usually do. Many of my shots, especially during group practice, were filmed from ground level or from my lap while sitting cross-legged. As mentioned above, the practice of chod fashions the body in particular ways. The act of seeing in this cross-legged position allows the practitioner to simply gaze at the

image of the deity and the text, which are usually situated just above knee level. In this way, the visual field is narrowed to help the practitioner focus and not get distracted. When I followed this type of seeing, I managed to focus well on my chod practice, playing the instruments, and chanting correctly. Once I raised my head and observed the rest of the room or the other ritual elements taking place, I became distracted, and my practice suffered.

While filming, I started to pay attention to small details, such as the way the chopas held their rosaries, the movement of the damaru, or the insights of ritual, which furthered my own understanding of the practice and helped me progress on my own chod path, as well as opening new directions of inquiry. It became obvious to me that there are as many chod practices as there are practitioners. Each person added something unique to their practice, either a particular damaru or kangling decoration, their tone of voice, collections of images, or clothing style. The practice of chod usually happened once or twice a month, and by following the same sequence of practice each time, I became interested in patterns of repetition. I explored those by filming repeated actions, such as making the shrine, but focusing on what was done differently each time. Repetition became a mode of learning to see aspects that were 'invisible' to me at the beginning of my fieldwork.

Where possible, my approach to filmmaking was collaborative, either in terms of strategy, content, or editing. During my apprenticeship with Yeshe, we discussed at length what a film on chod should contain. Yeshe's main concern was with the orthodoxy of chod and the accuracy of the information portrayed. He was keen that I chose the 'right people' to talk to.

By this, he referred to those who had empowerment and followed a 'recognized' teacher. Yeshe would often have clear directions in mind for the film, and we sat together to discuss and develop them. In his view, a film about chod should touch upon the following areas: the Vajra Master, the chants, the instruments, the Krodikali shrine, and the ritual cakes. I explored these areas through film, and I also established distance to develop a critical approach towards his views. I worked with people from other centres, such as Ka-Nying Shedrub, or with individual chopas, like Tenzin. I followed the paths of images from their creation (i.e., in the thangka school) to the effects they had on people who used them (I discuss this in detail in chapter 6). Another point of focus was the Boudhanath area, especially the Great Stupa – the social engine of the area. I used my intuition and my new skilled vision, or drew upon fieldnotes or chats with Yeshe, to shoot many of the images in the film. I also taught Yeshe to use the camera, and I often gave it to him to take videos and pictures of what he found important.

My filmmaking practice had its own challenges and limitations. One of the main challenges I encountered was a lack of help in filming and recording audio. During interviews, I collaborated with Yeshe, and he helped me with Tibetan and Nepali translations, but he was not skilled enough to help with the audio-visual side. During interviews, I had to pay attention to the framing of my interviewees, the audio quality, the conversations, and also to pay attention to the questions and answers that were given to be able to follow up with appropriate questions. This led me to make some aesthetic choices that I would have preferred to avoid. One of these choices was framing participants in the classic interview style, where the participant is filmed from the chest up and positioned in the first third section of a

screen, a technique also known as "talking heads." This type of framing allowed me to capture the participant talking, but also to pay attention to the questions and answers they were giving as well as the sound in my headphones.

One other limitation I had to overcome was the sound recording of the cremation ground scenes. Chopa Tenzin, the protagonist of these scenes, was very fluid in his motions and moved in unexpected ways. I clipped a radio microphone on his chest, and I also used a boom microphone on the camera. The radio microphone was left to record by itself, plugged into a sound recorder unsupervised. Because there was no one else who could monitor the levels of the sound, this peaked a number of times and made important parts of the sound unusable. To film this scene, I only had one chance, and I received no instructions on how and where Tenzin would move in space or how loud or quiet he would chant or play his instruments. I did my best to keep him in focus, decide what to film, and make sure that the sound in the camera is not peaking. While some scenes could be better, I think my previous filmmaking experience helped tremendously in this case. However, the interview I filmed with him in the cremation ground followed the same framing path as those filmed in Boudhanath.

Kathmandu's weather posed a number of challenges during my 13 months there. In the winter months, the streets are usually dusty, and dust could interfere with lenses, especially my manual cinematic lenses. During the summer months, the heat and the high humidity create a fog-like atmosphere, making it complicated to focus or capture details outside. Similarly, in the summer months, when I filmed interviews outdoors, my camera would overheat, and I would have to stop filming until the camera's temperature dropped. I overcame these

challenges by adapting to the weather conditions – for example, I would bring an umbrella to keep the camera in the shade when it was hot, or I would avoid filming wide angles when the weather was foggy.

In this chapter, I provide the reader with an ethnographic introduction to my field. I offer an overview of the practice of chod and discuss the main elements of the chod ritual. I ground the practice of chod in the social landscape of Boudhanath and introduce the reader to the Buddhist communities that developed as a result of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950. The chapter continues with a detailed introduction to my informants, especially Khenpo Yeshe, my main informant and collaborator. Finally, I engage in a discussion of methodology and limitations. In the next chapter, I build on the ethnographic context and provide the reader with an introduction to the history of chod and the main theoretical frameworks I engage with in my thesis.

# Chapter 2: A historic and scholastic journey

## into the development of chod

### 1. Literature on chod

A decade or so ago, the practice of chod was hidden from the non-Buddhist public and was largely hidden from non-tantric Buddhist practitioners. This posed a challenge for academics, non-Buddhists, or even non-tantric practitioners who wished to learn about the practice. The study of images and visualisations in the chod tradition is scarce and only a few authors have attempted to approach the subject. The existent literature on chod images approaches chod from a variety of angles such as: images of mental distress (David-Neel, 1932), images of texts, images of oppression and gender, images of sacrifice (Evans-Wentz, 1935), images of the body, or mystical and shamanic perspectives (Chaoul, 2009b). Before reviewing each of the above-mentioned categories, I offer the reader an overview of the position and role of images and visualisations in the Tibetan Buddhist context, as well as an overview of the academic literature on chod that has addressed these subjects. I suggest that images and visualisations are essential in Vajrayana Buddhism, as well as in chod, and they are one of the main vehicles for obtaining emptiness or enlightenment. If images aid a practitioner to obtain a state of emptiness, I ask the following questions: How do chod practitioners interact with, produce and experience images? What ways of seeing and being in the world are developed during chod and what is the role of images in this process? What is the role of hearing? What

impact do images and visualisations have outside the practice for the practitioner and wider society?

### **1.1 Ways of seeing in Tibetan Buddhism**

In early Tibetan Buddhism, vision was preferred over language. Language discourse was described as 'constitutive of a falsely constructed lifeworld' (McMahan, 2002, p. 22), and it was considered a medium that could not help one transcend the circle of grasping to attachments and suffering alone. Since language always deals with grasped objects of experience, in order to attain emptiness and liberation from suffering, one must be involved in 'the dissolution of the linguistic-conceptual activity itself' (ibid, p. 23). Therefore, direct perception, fundamentally visual in McMahan's terms, is to be privileged before language as a process. The result of the privilege of the visual leads towards the development of practices of image production and visualisation, such as meditations on death, loving-kindness, deity yoga, or the practice of chod. While experiencing these practices, a practitioner will enter/create an imagined world of Buddhist symbols, leaving aside language interpretation, and focus on the inherent values of the visualised symbols. However, language is not wholly dismissed, for in as much as it can induce error it can also bring enlightenment or emptiness. To overcome language, the practitioner must proceed via the understanding derived through visual practices. This theorization of the language-image relationship demonstrates that essential concepts in Buddhism have both visual representations and language-based descriptions. This raises questions about the ways in which agency and power are attributed to images and how they affect the day-to-day life of practitioners. Alongside agency and power, one should ask how seeing is a mode of practice, and how one interprets what one sees. Where is the image? What is the relationship between the body and the image?

McMahan (2002, p. 6) argues that not only are images at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism, but they are epistemological tools for communicating philosophical discourse. By creating a 'perfect' imaged world, such as the mandala of a deity, one can gain access to an 'un-mediated world' (ibid, p. 5), a pure world, where conceptual frameworks are dropped and knowledge is inherently visual. It implies a sensorial modality where vision is combined with other senses, such as hearing. I would like to push the boundaries of knowing-as-seeing further and ask if seeing, through the lenses of the Buddhist discourse and Tibetan language, can be an ontological position adopted by my informants. McMahan's views direct me towards adopting film as an epistemological tool to communicate the practice of chod.

However, one may ask if a language description or painting of a mandala of the Buddha is not itself mediated and anchored in the language in which one reads the tantric text or conceives of the meaning of an image? To what extent can language be separated from the visual? How does the concept of dependant origination, where everything is seen as dependent on other factors (the principle of causality), play a role in creating a pure and unmediated imaged world? In chapter 4 I bring into discussion one of the positions of my informants, where Tenzin suggest that reality as we experience it is not 'true nature', but one created by our 'ignorant mind' - a mind that is not awake. Since we experience and create this reality through vision, Tenzin suggest that we can overcome the obstacle of not seeing the true nature of the mind by practicing tantra. In other words, this means using the image to free one from the image and to obtain a state of emptiness. If images can bring one to a state of emptiness, I ask: How



important is it that one visualises with precise resemblance to the source? To what extent are images (paintings) of visual language, such as a description of the mandala of a deity, similar to the source (since Tibetan Buddhism has a multitude of painting styles and even different descriptions of the same visual representation are different in different texts)? In the case of paintings, a visual resemblance to the textual description is considered to be vital by my informants. The resemblance is, therefore, a 'powerful constituent in the construction of knowledge and establishing of practice' (Rotman, 2009, p. 173). In chapter 4 I argue that this theory of resemblance is lightly applied in practice, whether it be in the accuracy of the translation of tantric sadhanas, or the painter's skills in copying images, or the practitioner's capacity to engage in visualisation rituals based on these images.

## **1.2 Tibetan Buddhism and sensory practices**

In orthodox Tibetan Buddhism the senses and emotions are considered deceptive, but they are also made use of to aspire to and reach the desired state of emptiness. The senses and afflictive emotions are a reminder of worldly suffering but also means for practitioners through which liberation from suffering can be achieved. Tantra can be seen as a way of dissolving the duality between the perceived and the real, or between the subject and the object (J. Gentry, 2019, p. 9). Tantric rituals like chod engage the sensorium to help one to see the nature of reality vs perceived reality dichotomy, and to aspire to 'pure reality' (i.e., embodying the perfect qualities of a deity):

As tantric rituals captivate the senses through the music, movements, accoutrements, smells, colours, textures, and tastes of their baroque ceremonials, they evocatively

beckon us to “imagine” (mos) our personal selves, sensory interactive field, and surrounding environments as none other than the ultimate mode of reality itself. (J. Gentry, 2019, p. 9).

In this way, tantric rituals are used to recondition one’s sense of a self and map it to the desired self (no-self) cultivated in a state of emptiness, not only through theoretical methods but through complex experiential practices. While this is a general overview of the orthodoxy behind ritual practices, one may ask: in what way does this apply in practice and to what extent are the senses engaged in this process of reshaping experience to a ‘pure’ one (or emptiness)?

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition privileges seeing over other senses. At the same time, all senses are used in the path towards obtaining a state of emptiness. For example, the famous Tibetan Book of the Dead (tib. Bardo Thodol) is mistranslated, and it should be translated as Liberation Upon Hearing in the Between. The text is used to explain what precedes dying and it also serves as a guide for the consciousness of the departed in the bardo (the place between rebirths) to reach a state of enlightenment. The text is often read by a lama by the dying person’s bed, and it is sporadically read by lamas for the dying person after they passed away. In this way, the sound of the text read aloud is used as a method for guiding the consciousness of the dead after it has left the body. The book also mentions that both hearing and seeing remain present for the passed away person after death, as part of one’s consciousness (Gayley, 2007, p. 490). As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, before Vajrayana tradition reached Tibet, the act of liberation through the use of the senses was an established philosophical line in the

Tibetan tradition (Gayley, 2007). Gentry (2019) in his translation of the *Astonishing Ocean: An Explication of the Practice of Eleven Liberations*, indicates that one may obtain liberation from samsara through the use of smell, hearing, touch, sight, wearing, training, drinking, making, cultivating and recollecting. The practice of chod includes all these aspects of liberation, with an emphasis on seeing and hearing.

In his book *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*, Robert Desjarlais (2003) employs a sensorial exploration of different selves in the Yolmo community, native residents from the Helambu Valley 45km to the north of Kathmandu, of Boudhanath. Through a phenomenological approach, Desjarlais focuses on the lives of two Yolmo Buddhists, a lama and a lamini (the daughter of a lama), and their modes of being in the world. In the case of lama Mheme, his main mode of engaging with the world was through the sense of vision. Mheme 'spoke in ways that brought to mind ideas of materiality and immateriality, appearances and disappearances, contact and disconnection, longing and fulfilment, remembrance and forgetting, matter and the decay of matter, the changes that time effects, the fat of sentient bodies, the life and death of things' (ibid, p. 2). Meanwhile lamini Kisang's way of being in the world was centred mainly around sounds and the flow of words: 'in her world, a great deal of action took place through talk and various intonations, silences, looks, and facial expressions that accompanied it' (ibid, p. 139). Not only is it that Mheme and Kisang relate differently to the world, but they also gather their knowledge of the world differently and make truth assumptions based on their senses: 'whereas the lama looked for stable truths in objects that could be readily seen, such as the footprint or a sacred text, Kisang took as relative, socially established truths what people said was the case about something' (ibid, p.

340). Desjarlais invites us to take a closer look at the Yolmo way of being in and mediating with the world through the senses. Desjarlais (2003, p. 6) sees the senses and gender as key factors that shape and are shaped by subjectivities, identities, and in understanding time and history.

### **1.3 The outside view of chod and mental distress**

The performative aspect of chod rituals is rich in imagery, not only in the mind of the practitioner but also in the minds of those who watch the practice. One of the earliest accounts of a chod ritual belongs to David-Neel (1932), a French-Belgian traveller. During a journey around Tibet in 1924, David-Neel briefly describes her encounter with chopas and provides the reader with one of the first descriptions of chod from a lay person (non-monastic) perspective. David-Neel depicts the practice through theatrical images, describing the ritual as ‘a drama enacted by a single actor’ (ibid, p. 149). Her thesis is mostly concerned with images of mental distress, particularly in the experiences of young chopas and their practices of visualisations. Her experience as an initiated lay chopas practicing in fearful places is described as a battle between the perception of landscape images, such as clouds that look like they are talking to her, and the ability to discern the ‘unreal’ from the real via the practice of chod. These challenges are transposed to the minds of novice chopas who continuously duel in visualisations of the ‘dreadful mystic banquet’ (of offering one’s body) (ibid, p. 148). David-Neel argues that these visualisations could be damaging for the young chopas’s mental health. In her view, the chod visualisations of giving one’s body are problematic, because they blur boundaries between the real and the hallucinatory. The latter was attributed by her to

the lack of medical treatment, lack of sleep or appropriate food, and the impossibility of the novices distinguishing between the real and the imaginary. The performance of the body offering part of chod by a young monk near a sky burial appeared to David-Neel like the monk was feeling the pain of his body being eaten alive by demons (1932, p. 160). The image she describes of him belong to those of a madman, with “ghastly vision ... grim appearance ... and convulsive gestures of intensive physical pain” (ibid, p. 160), and “growing in agony” (ibid, p. 161). When David-Neel confronted the monk’s teacher on the dwelling of the young monk, she was presented with the belief that the monk needs to understand that the demons that eat his flesh are none other than the monk himself, and that the monk was warned about the dangers (illness, maddens, and death) of practicing chod before he was initiated (ibid, p. 163).

Despite the outdated approach that David-Neel’s account addresses important aspects of the performance and the imaged world of chod outside the comfort of the monastery or one’s home. Themes such as the ritualistic aspects of chod, the suspension of disbelief when one is faced with hallucinations, the sacrifice of the body of the practitioner, or the demon-self relationship constantly appear in the literature on chod and emphasise the importance of the visual and the role of perception in the chopas’ being in the world. The literature raises questions about the agency of images, especially at the interface between induced hallucinations and the ability to control these images created in the mind. If one creates the image of a demon eating one’s flesh and acts on that image, can we talk about the image as being apart from the practitioner? Does the image or the creator of the image have agency? Is agency even a useful concept here?

The anthropologist Evens-Wentz (1935) understands chod as a ritual sacrifice, and writes about it in identical terms to David-Neel (1932), as ‘a drama enacted by a single actor’ (p. 282). Evens-Wentz links chod to pre-Bon practices (pre-Buddhism) in the Lamaism tradition (a local Tibetan tradition with strong links to shamanism), under the category of animal and human sacrifice ceremonies. Evens-Wentz associated the roots of chod with the end of year Tibetan rites, specifically the Mystery Play, a performance ritual aimed at safeguarding the population from demons or other malevolent beings. In Evens-Wentz’s view, the ritual of the Mystery-Play changed over time from human to animal to sacrifice of a figure. The ritual can be compared to the visualisations of offering one’s body, and the flour figures (tib. tormas) lamas offer nowadays as sacrifice. Evens-Wentz finds similarities in the ritual of chod with the kimchinjunga war-dance in Sikkim, as well as the bodhisattva’s sacrifice. His analysis suggests that the body sacrifice and the ritual of death is a result of the development of chod over an extensive period of time. Despite the emphasis on drama, Evens-Wentz’ informants also view chod as a healing practice, that is for individual illnesses as well as for collective afflictions. Evens-Wentz’s research leads me to ask how the ritual of chod, as presented today, is constructed over time, in terms of the body sacrifice, ritual of healing, as well as the elements of demonic feasting. While the lineages of Buddhism present chod as an uninterrupted lineage from the time of the Buddha, linguistic and historical sources presented later in this chapter (Harding, 2003; Sorensen, 2013), suggest that the visualisations, music and images associated with today’s practice were added to the traditional canon as chod developed over time.

In *Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*, Mumford (1989) offers a brief overview of chod as a funeral rite. The visualised body, in Mumford's analysis, is viewed as a totalising image of all bodies one has had in previous lives, and a total account of all the merit and good karma or Karmic debt and bad karma accumulated over multiple lives. Once one is free of karmic debt, one can advance to a state of emptiness. Mumford (1989) and Bernstein (2013) understand chod as a ritual that helps one get rid of karmic debt via offering the body (in visualisations) as a feast for the beings one is indebted to. Seeing, and knowing as seeing, are presented in Mumford's ethnography under the form of chod as a death ritual, where the lama in charge has agency (with the aid of the deity in charge of the practice) over the body of the deceased which is offered to demons and benevolent beings in order to pay the karmic debt of the dead. This type of chod practice is performed for 49 days following a death, in an interval known as the Bardo period, when the consciousness of the dead person should be guided by a lama and the community to help them along the path to reincarnation (Goss & Klass, 1997). In this case, the body of the deceased is represented in the form of an edifice, and it is cut in many pieces and offered to all practitioners.

The experience of an image in the setting of the chod performed for the consciousness of the deceased, as described by Mumford (1989), pushes the boundaries of the existence of images, further than being either part of one's mind or images outside the mind/body. The possibility of visualising chod on behalf of the deceased brings into discussion the Buddhist ontological position on the inter-connectedness of all beings as one consciousness, which is a requisite view one needs to embrace to reach a state of emptiness. Mumford (1989, p. 209) illustrates this through the views of one of his informants, who believes that the ritual and

the body offering to all sentient beings allow 'all beings to move forward together rather than just one'. In the case of chod, the body, or more precisely the image of the body, becomes a medium for obtaining a state of emptiness where the body is divided and fed to all the creditors owed the dead's karmic debt. This leads us to ask questions about the creation of the self and the motivations behind the ritual creation of a non-self or the cutting of the ego. Is the self a cumulus of pieces, like the sacrifice of the body, which needs to be surrendered back to where they were borrowed from in order to achieve a state of emptiness? Furthermore, the text in the final part of the ritual – the dissolution stage in the Krodikali version (arguably present in all versions of chod) – asks the chopas to visualise all that was imagined during the practice as an non-conceptual stage of primordial awakening, of emptiness: 'all appearances of the external world and its contents dissolve like an illusory magical display into unborn, unceasing, unchanging Dharmakaya (space of emptiness). Uncontrived total equality is all pervasive' (chod text). Could the non-conceptual stage of chod be seen as an image of dissolved images? The question itself challenges the notion of an image, and it may require a classification of images based on the stages of chod as well as the experience of the actors who engage with them. The last stage of the practice does also challenge one to interpret the visualisation stages as aspects of one image, rather than a collection of different images visualised at different stages. Questions may also be posed about how to interpret the role of the body in chod practice, the agency of the body, the representation of what the body is for the practitioner, as well as the overall social implications of the dead body and karmic debt.

## **2. Agency, agents and the gift of the Body**



## 2.1 Agency and agents of images

The multitude of images involved in the practice of chod can be viewed as actors with agency. In order to understand the of agency of images in the context of chod, one must go back to the early stages of Buddhism. Rotman (2009) argues that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, there was an emphasis on acts of seeing rather than prayer, meditation, or engagements with the scriptures. As an example, concepts such as faith (tib. prasada), were a product of ‘aesthetic engagement’ (ibid, p. 55) with a mental state, which is neither an affective frame of mind nor a cognitive position. Rotman argues that faith is a sensory experience, constructed ‘exclusively through the medium of sight – individuals see an agent of prasada, such as the Buddha, and then prasada arises in them’ (ibid, p. 67). Following Rotman, I suggest that images have agency in creating faith and that they also shape mental states that allow for knowledge to arise and karmic enhancement. Similar to faith, ideas of wisdom (tib. yeshe) are materialised visually in the form of sculptures, as Kinnard (2001) suggests. However, Rotman’s (2009) thesis on images does not question the role of images in ritual visualisations. In the case of chod, images (starting from a painting) are manipulated and visualised in the mind of the practitioner. Images may aid the practitioner to cultivate faith, but they also do much more than that: the visualised image of a deity performs actions, such as cutting the practitioner’s body. The extent to which images have agency in the case of chod is unclear. Does the practitioner empower the image, or do the images empower the agent to make the image perform an action? What other agents empower images and the practitioner? Or do both the practitioner and the image of the deity have agency in the visualised world?

McDaniel (2011) expands on Gell's theory of art agency, in which agency is located outside the artist/image and conceptualised as a relation between objects, the environment and artist, rather than a property of an image per se. One may ask if agency can be seen at the interface between objects (chod ritual objects), the chopa or the deity, and the environment (the temple/place of practice). The power of images can be looked at through Gell's (1998) theory of enchantment where art is not evaluated by its aesthetic capacities, but by its powers of enchantment. Here, enchantment is created by the relationship people have with images, and I would argue, the frequency with which an image is seen. Often, outside of ritual performances, deity paintings, monuments and sculptures are objects of décor in both temples and houses. The most relevant example here is the Great Stupa of Boudhanath: the stupa is a place to worship and prayer, but also a place where people meet to do business or hang out. When hanging out at the stupa my informants said they appreciated the building for its beauty and majestic design, rather than its Buddhist importance. However, I suggest that in repeatedly seeing the image of the Great Stupa's eyes – the viewer may be enchanted. The power and enchantment of images may transcend the need for a physical representation of the stupa, as in the case of one lama who taught at RYI who told his students that the power of the stupa is so great that only by looking at a picture of it one may receive blessings and be granted wishes. In this instance, the representation of the stupa – a picture – holds the physical attributes of the stupa itself (i.e., the qualities of granting blessings and wishes), and no difference is made between the image and the physical stupa.

So far, I have underlined that agency, in the case of Buddhist images, follow Gell's theory of distributed agency (between the artist, image, recipient, and prototype) and incorporate the

relationship between other images (religious or not) in their immediate surroundings. A careful reflection on the function and use of deity paintings will demonstrate that agency can be constructed by other means as well, where deity paintings have an instrumental use. In Reedy's (1992) view, the functions of deity paintings/sculptures are to benefit the practitioner in learning and to aid memory and focus of attention. The image also provides 'a means for a person to record and communicate his or her meditation experiences to others' (Reedy 1992, p. 42). Reedy (ibid) considers deity paintings works of art and suggests that they are created by the artist to convey the same meditation experience for all practitioners, or in other words is the same experience of reality. The theory of agency can be then developed even further to include not only the relationship between images, but ~~the relationship and~~ the experience created for the meditation practitioner during practice. In this way the practitioner becomes not only the recipient of the image (in Gell's terms), but also an advocate for the experience created by the agency of the image. One may question Reedy's point and ask if it is possible to convey the same experience of meditation through producing and reproducing an image. The process of visualisation of an image is based not only on the quality of the image, but on the visualisation skills of the practitioner. In chapter 3, I discuss the way painters make these images at a local school. Students are taught to respect the paintings and to be humble and pray to them, but their job is to create an identical copy of the deity painting rather than to paint with the intention of inducing an experience.

The theory of agency can be valuable in understanding the practitioners' experience of images and their role in the chod ritual, as well as the functions of the body in the creation or dissolution of the self/ego. To reflect on the implications of agency in the practice, the actors

and the ones acted upon need to be identified. I was able to identify the following pairs of agent-agency: chopas—images of deity and its entourage, chopas as the object of visualisations—the imaged world in the visualisation that she/he commands, chopas—body of the practitioner in the visualisations, chopas—ritual objects, lama—body of a different practitioner (in the case of a funeral rite), chopas—the karmic creditors, chopas—demons, chopas—group of chopas (in the case of group practice), deity—chopas, deity—body of the chopas, deity—imaged world, deity—demons, guests of the feast—body of chopas, guests of feasts/demons—chopas, temple/place of practice—chopas, or any combination of the above. On another note, one can ask what the agency of images in the film is. By reflecting on the body, agency can be seen as a means for acting upon previous actions in previous lives and paying debts created during the practice. During chod visualisations, the visualised body is immobile and lacks agency. The body can be seen as an image inscribed by one's deeds in past lives, waiting to be purified and transformed into nectar (skt. Amrita) and offered to all beings.

## **2.2 The gift of the body**

During feast visualisations, the practitioner is required to visualise their karmic body that summarises all their lives lived up till that moment. Once the *pho tba* (transfer of consciousness ritual) finishes, the body is usually left immobile on the ground without consciousness and it is inscribed with the resonance of the self as well as with all the negative actions one may have done in the past, under the form of debt to other beings. During the group practice of *Krodikali*, a different type of representation of the body is present under the form of the flour body, which is 'sacrificed' as a symbol of all beings collectively. In this

section of the ritual, the body is analysed from the physical perspective as well as through the representations of the chopra in the eyes of the wider community.

The feast of the dead body should not be confused with a funeral ritual. During chod, the physical body of the practitioner (as opposed to the visualised one) has different purposes depending on the role it performs, be it either the body as a ritual performer (mobile during dances or grounded in one place) that purifies the ritual area. During chod visualisations one may ask if the practitioner is both in and out of their body. If images, like in the case of the stupa mentioned above, receive the same attributes as the objects they represent, could the feast visualisations be seen as situations where one has and does not have a body? During feasts visualisations – a practice that goes by the name of lujin (lu- body, jin – sacrifice/charity) or body offering – multiple bodies are visualised (depending on the feast performed). For the Troma Nagmo (or Krodikali) practice, these are divided in four parts and associated with four colours (white, red, mixed – also known as rainbow – and black) as well as with the landscape and substances (i.e., mountains, lakes, honey, milk). The colours are usually associated with body parts (i.e., white (karghe) for the brain, consciousness, bone marrow; red is associated with meat and blood and black is representative of fat and oils). The lujin part of the ritual in the Troma Nagmo tradition is most commonly practiced individually and at times in a group, and at specific times of the day: before sunrise, dawn, noon, and twilight.

Bernstein (2013, p. 174) analyses the body offering section of the ritual from the perspective of the gift. The gift, as an anthropological concept, refers to the action of giving, receiving and

reciprocating as a way of building social relations, and is totalising, present in all areas of social life (Mauss 2000 [1925], p. 3). While the gift is characterised by reciprocity, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, the concept of *dāna* refers to a non-reciprocal gift (Bernstein, 2013, p. 173). Mauss (2000), argues against Malinowski's (1961, p. 177) notion of the pure gift to suggest that no gift is free. The concept of the free gift in Buddhism (*dāna*) refers to giving up (i.e., to monks and *chopas*), giving down (i.e., to beggars), and giving up the world. In this context, Laidlaw (2000) considers the gift a form of exchange, where giving is a form of gaining merit, which is meant to help the practitioner cultivate good karma and benefits in future lives. The case of *chod* involves all forms of giving, giving up to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, giving down to demons, as well as giving up the world in the case of some practitioners (renouncers). The *chopa* offers his/her body and the teachings of the Buddha to all beings and does not ask for anything in return, and the benefits the *chopa* receives come in the form of karmic merit for future lives (Bernstein, 2013, p. 177). In Buddhism desires are mostly considered unworthy and linked to the causes of suffering, yet the desire of selflessness is one that is valued and indeed necessary to obtain a state of emptiness. Bataille (1991) sees death, or offering one's self for the benefit of others, as the ultimate sacrifice and thus the absolute exchange. However, Bernstein (2013, p. 177) argues that this anti-economy does not qualify as an absolute exchange because Bataille did not take into account the concept of rebirth, where sacrifice is not the end, but a transformation. In this way, Bernstein (*ibid*, p. 179) argues that the gift of the body is an economic exchange between the living and the dead. As I will explain in the following account, I would also add that it is an exchange between the living and the living, a form of debt payment to creditors and a form of adding points to a 'savings account' of karmic merit. Is the body offering a form of establishing a karmic equilibrium? If the

visualised body offering is a form of establishing equilibrium, how are the physical bodies of the chopas seen by the non-practitioners and what meanings do they inscribe on them?

### **2.3 The historical development of the body offering**

In order to better understand chod, one may ask if the set of practices as they are known today are the same as Machik Labdron, the founder of chod, envisioned them in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Have the complexity of the visualisations, the music and chanting, the lengths of the sadhana texts, as well as the variety of chod traditions stayed the same or have they developed with social economic and political changes over time? Some answers to this question can be had by looking at historical developments in the chod texts, as well as the commentaries offered by masters of chod, like Machik Labdron. In this section, we will see how the visualisations and images used in the practice today have adapted to the needs of practitioners over time. Moreover, I lean on Critical Buddhist Studies to investigate the role gender has historically played in Tibetan Buddhism in order to understand why chod is the only popular Tibetan Buddhist practice initiated by a female. The following section therefore provides an overview of the main historic texts on the roots of chod, chod lineages, the body offering, and the legitimisation of chod as a Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Sorensen (2013) argues that *The Great Explanation*, *The Blue Annals*, and *The Ring Brgyud* are essential historical texts on the subject of chod. *The Great Explanation*, written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the most detailed bibliographies of Machik Labdron. The book details the encounters between Machik and Padampa Sangye, her teacher. In one circumstance the yogi

teaches Machik to make a big banquet and to invite many divine guests including Mother Prajnaparamita (mother of the Buddhas). The banquet present in chod practice today has its roots in this historic banquet, yet it is not clear if elements of the body offering were observed in the original feast. The feast was offered to guarantee the practitioner a 'long life of clear obstacles' (Lab sgron, 1971, pp. 54–55). The biography mentions that Machik transmitted the feast practice to her sons and daughters, and another 116 of her students. Transmission lineages such as these shaped the practice of chod, and each lineage developed according to different philosophical interpretations of the Buddhist teachings. Sorensen (2013) argues that in The Great Explanation three distinctive lineages can be identified: sutra (mdo – word of the Buddha), tantra (rgyud – inner/secret teachings of the Mahayana tradition), and sutra-tantra (Mdo-rgyud, a combination of both).

In The Blue Annals, written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we observe how the lineages diversified even more, and they were separated into male (pho) and female (mo) alongside the three mentioned above. The pho lineage was transmitted by Padampa Sangye himself, and the mo lineage by Machik, but there is no discussion about the lineages being transmitted from Padampa Sangye to Machik or otherwise. The Ring Brgyud Gsol 'Debs, included in The Treasury of Precious Instructions, also written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, makes no mention of the male lineage but provides a detailed overview of how chod was adopted by the Kagyu school and spread by the Karmapas (the heads of the Kagyu School). The book also mentions a lineage in the Geluk tradition, although historically this school did not focus/has not focused on chod practice. Today, the popularity of chod, predominantly in the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions/schools (or a combination of both, like the Ka-Nying Shedrub), means that



monasteries are often pressured to teach the practice or adopt it. Bernestein (2013, p. 161) provides an ethnographic account of a monk who worked translating old texts in the Geluk tradition that contained mentions of chod in order to revitalise the practice and to prove that it is also part of the Dalai Lama's lineage: 'some Buddhists think that there is no chöd in Geluk. But all of this is a slander coming from the Karma Kagyu. To think that Ole Nydahl claims there is no Tantra in Geluk! They think we are just these dry intellectuals who can't do Tantra'.

In the historical sources there is little evidence available to suggest that current versions of chod are the same as when first taught. The question to be asked here is if the lujin texts, which detail the body offering visualisations, are a new development of the past centuries and if so, why were they added? In Harding's (2013) analysis of the first chod texts attributed to Machik and her students, there is no considerable evidence that the practice of chod contained any lujin sections. In orthodox accounts, inspiration for the practice is said to have come from the recitation of the Prajnaparamita text by the monks (the perfection of transcendent wisdom texts) and evidence for this is traced to her use of 'mara', a notion/philosophy which refers to spiritual obscuration/spiritual death (Skt. Mr-to die) that prevents one from achieving a state of emptiness or Buddhahood. The many references to maras in chod texts suggest that the primary purpose of the practice of chod is to deal with these negative forces, commonly seen as demons or the ego. In the first texts attributed to Machik, the notion of 'chod' (to cut, to sever) is used interchangeably with 'spyod' (action, behaviour). The notions of 'spyod' and 'spyod yul' are often found in Prajnaparamita texts in reference to the conduct of Bodhisattva (a person who is able to obtain emptiness, but it delays it because of his/her compassion to help others obtain the same). One may argue that

tradition and orthodoxy in chod practice can be found at the intersection of practice and translation. In short, over time, the practice of chod multiplied into a variety of practices and texts, but chod was never granted the status of a Tibetan Buddhist lineage in its own right. Buddhist Studies scholars have thus argued that chod orthodoxy is rooted more in practice than in text (Sorensen, 2013).

Harding (2013) proposes that over the ten texts attributed to Machik and her followers, there are only mentions of 'separating the mind from the body', which in today's text is equivalent to the transfer of consciousness to a deity, known as 'opening the door to the sky'. Harding's translation of Machik's first text, *The Great Bundle*, contains the following body related reference: 'awareness carries the corpse of one's body; cast it out in an unattached way in haunted grounds and their frightening places'. *The Heart Essence of Profound Meaning*, an early comment on Machik's chod, offers the following body reference: 'free the mind of self-fixation by relinquishing the body aggregate as food. Scatter the master of self-fixation by separating body and mind. Liberate fear on its own ground by inspecting the fearful one. Tossing away fixation on the body as self, obstacles will arise as glory' (Harding 2013). In other texts on Machik's teachings, references to the body offering are as follows: 'casting out the body to demons is unbearable'<sup>3</sup>; 'what should one do when the body is sick? Chop it up and offer it as a feast'<sup>4</sup>; 'immediately hand over the body to those gods and demons without

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<sup>3</sup> *Another Bundle*, DNZ vol. 14, p. 109

<sup>4</sup> Ibis

concerns'; 'unspeakable, unthinkable, inexpressible, or else rest in the separation of body and awareness, or else cast out the body as food and rest within the state of awareness'<sup>5</sup>.

Reference to the body offering appears in texts that travelled from Tibet to India in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. An example here is found in Esoteric Instructions on the Perfection of Wisdom, by Aryadeva the Brahmin, who makes reference to the body offering in the case of lower-level practitioners: 'those with superior meditative experience rest in the nondual meaning of it all. The average practitioners focus on that and meditate. The inferior offer their body aggregate as food.' The notion of differentiating between practitioners based on their capabilities is frequently found in Buddhist philosophy. Critical Buddhism scholar Makransky (2008) attributes this process of skilful means as effective cultural adaptation to a strategy of legitimising new tendencies in Buddhism. For example, teachings in the Theravada tradition are said to derive from the pure teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Equally, sutras in the Mahayana tradition are said to be direct teachings from the Buddha (even if they were written long after his death), and Zen Buddhism traces its teachings all the way back to Shakyamuni (Davidson, 1990; McRae, 1988, 1989; Williams, 1989). Makransky (2008, p. 121) argues that institutional and doctrinal competition created a diverse range of often conflicting interpretations, with each tradition claiming belonging to a true and uninterrupted lineage from the time of the Buddha.

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<sup>5</sup> The Eight Common Appendices, DNZ, vol. 14, p. 139

From its origins, the practice of chod has undergone adaptations, not only in terms of lineage diversification and the body offering visualisations, but also in terms of gender. Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhism was predominantly male oriented, and women were given lower positions in the hierarchy. Moreover, it was thought almost impossible for women to reach a state of emptiness. This is exemplified in the translation of the term *woman lomn*, which means 'lower rebirth' (in comparison to 'higher' male rebirth). Keeping this in mind, one may question how a practice developed by a woman has survived until today? Chod, as any other tantric practice, may require the visualisation of the lineage holder, in this case Machik. While practitioners in the 11<sup>th</sup> century were accustomed to visualising both female and male deities or Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, it was unusual to visualise women who were not deities. The issue was overcome by changing the visualisation of Machik to the visualisation of Vajrayogini or one of her avatars (i.e., Vajravarahi), a female deity that was popular in the tantric context between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century (English 2002, pp. 26-27). Another reason the visualisation for the practice was changed is the fact that chod does not have a tantric lineage or a supportive tantric text, even though it involves tantric elements. Thus, linking chod with a tantric deity might have legitimised the practice in the tantric context. After a period of time, Machik was raised to the status of deity and she thus became the support visualisation for some of the chod practices. In the *Krodikali* thangka, this deity is considered a manifestation of Vajravarahi. In the thangka of *Krodikali*, Machik is depicted in the top left side of the painting as a lineage holder after Padampa Sangye. Sorensen (2013) argues that once Machik received deity status, the practice of chod was adopted by different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and was then spread throughout monasteries in India and Tibet. Since the

visualisations of chod were changed overtime to legitimise the practice, what can be said about the agents (the deities) that made this happen? Why was text not sufficient to validate chod but an image was? Could images, and subsequently visualisations, be given an influential role than text (or language)? In what way does the visualisation of a female deity affect practitioners today? What other social, economic or political factors influenced the development of chod visualisations?

### **3. Buddhist economics and ritual economies of chod**

While the majority of this thesis explores the internal dynamics of chod practice and the role of the body and the senses, it is important to show how the ritual has influenced and been influenced by the wider social, economic and political climate in which it has developed. An important milestone here was the influx of Tibetan refugees to the Boudhanath area after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s. Equally, the increasing popularity of chod in the past 15 years is rooted in recent changes in the development of Boudhanath and Nepal, and trends in Buddhism on a local and international level. The following section presents an overview of the relationship between chod (and Tibetan Buddhism in general) and the social, economic and political environment. In particular, I focus on the ritual economies of chod in relation to the production, distribution and exchange of values of the self in association with others (i.e., the environment, human and non-human actors), as well as the production and distribution of chod ritual objects. Here I adopt a framework based on an ontology of adaptation.

In its broadest sense, ontology is the branch of philosophy that explores the nature of being and existence. In the Tibetan Buddhist view, the nature of being, or the nature of the mind, is a state desired by practitioners known as emptiness, more commonly referred to as

enlightenment. While this is a desired state, most practitioners dwell on becoming 'emptiness' rather than being 'in a state of emptiness'. As explained above, from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, our existence and way of being in the world is bound to the rules of this reality until we obtain emptiness. Tibetan Buddhism teaches that we should use the means of reality to obtain the desired state, an example being the use of the visual (i.e., image production, visualisations) to obtain emptiness (enlightenment is also a visual metaphor). Here, I adopt an ontological perspectivist approach to the visual and argue that Buddhism seeks to change reality from the point of view of our relationship to perspective rather than reality as it is per se (inherently different for each person), until one reaches a state of emptiness. The enactment of the 'nature of reality' (tib. Gnas lugs) emphasises the need to view our collective ignorance (ma rig pa – concept opposed to the nature of the mind) as a multitude of ontologies, which, I argue, are inherently grounded in adaptation. This multitude of ontologies can be viewed as different perspectives on becoming, and they can be grounded in the context where they happen, and only be valid in that specific context. Thus, the only ontological perspective I focus on here is the ontology of adaptation, specific to each moment and context in question. Adaptation in this sense does not involve a passive catching up with the situation of the moment, but a creative process of arrangements, rearrangements and derangements of the agents (including the self, humans and non-humans) involved in the situational context.

I adopt an ontology of adaptation to understand the adaptation processes in Boudhanath between all actors/agents of the social, economic and political environment, in relation to chod and Tibetan Buddhism. A closer reflection on the social fields in Boudhanath highlights

how the economic development of the area is strongly related to Buddhism. This economic development is largely driven by Buddhist related businesses and places of worship, either through crafts sales, monastery construction and expansion, the hospitality industry and tourism, the Buddhist related academic industry, and the growth of a Buddhist expat community; all of which have grown in recent years due to the increasing popularity of chod. I find ritual economies a helpful concept to use here because it 'exposes for analysis how the process of materializing worldview(s) through ritual practice structure economic behaviour without determining it' (McAnany and Wells, 2008, p. 1).

In chapter 3, I explore the ritual economies of chod from a perspective of monastic economies, Buddhist related businesses, and the rise of the expat community in Boudhanath. Buddhist businesses are particularly interesting, because alongside financial gains, shop owners and craftsmen gain karmic merit through making and commercialising their products. The practice of merit making through creating Dharma objects (or Buddhist objects) has a long history, evidenced in Sarah Fraser's(2004) book *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia*. The book is based on 40 000 manuscripts and Buddhist paintings found at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Mogao caves in the northwest of China. Fraser analyses the processes involved in creating Buddhist objects, from sketches to wall-sized paintings, textual recitations and aesthetic idealization in the art of the Song Dynasty. Fraser highlights the influence Buddhist art have had on non-Buddhist art and creative processes in northwest China. Fraser also engages in an analysis of the economics of Buddhist paintings and artist-patron-monastics relationships. The manuscripts indicate how the growth in popularity of Buddhist paintings led towards standardised modes of stylistic

production and the establishment of a painting academy. The development of the academy had further implications and gave rise to a network of artistic exchange, both in terms of economics and karma. Artists were paid in food products, and they gained karmic merit from painting. In turn, the patrons gained karmic merit for purchasing the paintings. The resources involved in these economic and karmic exchanges were further distributed to the whole community through feasts and celebrations. In time, art products gained value and started to be evaluated through the currency of food and gifts, especially by the elite patrons of the Tang and Five Dynasties (Fraser, 2004).

The creation of value and structure in Buddhist aesthetics came about through the exchange of commodities, thus transforming the experience of early Buddhism in northwest China. The artistic production of Buddhist images moved from being concealed in the temples, to the academies, from artists that were affiliated with the government to independent artists (Fraser, 2004, p. 32), which demonstrates that Buddhist image production took a different direction and became a profitable business. How are Buddhist businesses run in Boudhanath today? What motivations lie behind the production of chod ritual objects?



# Chapter 3: Ritual economies of chod: ritual objects and monastic spaces

## 1. Ritual economies of chod

In the previous chapter I introduced the main question of this thesis: how ways of seeing through means of visualisation and the process of cutting of the self are enacted via the practice of chod on an experiential level. In this chapter, I address this question by considering the social, economic and political networks in Boudhanath. I am inspired here by the work of Cook, 2010; Moran, 2010; Owen, 2011; Gerke, 2017. I ask: what is the connection between economy and ritual and what does this tell us about the development of Boudhanath? The Boudhanath region has developed rapidly over the last few years, as the town has become an important Tibetan Buddhist monastic home away from Tibet. Local market activities have adapted to provide for the ritual needs of monasteries as well as the practitioners that followed them. Similarly, the increasing number of tourists (including pilgrims) visiting the area has catalysed the development of a specialised economy that caters for them. Today, the main economic activities in Boudhanath are focused around providing for ritual needs through Dharma shops and catering for tourists through guest houses, tea houses and restaurants. In this way, Boudhanath moved from catering to a local economy to catering for a global economy.

Over the past 15 years, the practice of chod has become increasingly popular, leading towards the development of a specialised market that provides chod-specific ritual objects, such as damarus or kanglings. Alongside this, the ritual of chod directs economic resources towards offerings, chod cloths, sadhana production, thangka and images making, as well as chod centres or retreat spaces. Gudeman and Hann (2015, p. 7) identified that ritual and economies are tied together and an increase in wealth leads to an increase in ritual spendings. However, I would also like to point out that the increasing popularity of chod has generated wealth and spending more generally in the region. With the development of new businesses, influx of tourism, and enlarged popularity of chod, the economic prosperity of the region has increased, allowing for more money to be directed towards chod rituals and offered to monasteries. The growing popularity of chod in Euro-American contexts has also created greater demand for ritual objects, and Dharma businesses in Boudhanath have expanded their market and now sell internationally at high prices. The question that arises here is how these exterior forces play a role in local practice and experience, both for chod practitioners specifically and the inhabitants of Boudhanath more generally.

As part of this research, I am interested in the visualisations of chod through the internal mechanisms and processes that the practitioner undergoes when one embarks on the journey of chod. While the inner and outer worlds of one's life intrinsically influence each other, it is important to consider the wider environment/world of the chod practitioner in understanding how the practice has developed and how it was taught, learnt, and practised in Boudhanath. How is chod embedded in wider spheres of social and economic network relations in Boudhanath? What effects do these networks of relations have on the practice and the communities of practitioners? In this chapter, I argue that religious rituals like chod

are embedded in networks of social economic and political relations, where market forces shape the experience of ritual practices and ritual practices shape the development of the market. Practices of creation and the consumption of goods themselves 'communicate and constitute values and beliefs' (McAnany & Wells, 2008, p. 5), therefore creating specific social dynamics and rituals. Similarly, objects are rooted with ritual meaning and the act of producing these objects (i.e., thangkas) is embedded with ritual signification (i.e., a damaru maker may gain karmic merit for making chod objects). Thus, the connection between ritual and economy reaffirms, challenges, and reconstructs both social structures and the self.

To explore these premises, I turn my attention towards an analysis of the ritual economies of chod by looking at how local communities of producers of chod related ritual objects create meaning and interpret their work in relation to chod and Buddhism overall, as well as the effects this has on them and the inhabitants of Boudhanath. Carrasco (2007, p. 11) argues for an incorporation of ritual economies in our understanding of economic and political organisation, due to the potential of ritual in transforming economic structures as well as in reinforcing social and political assemblies. The concept of ritual economy is defined by Wells and McAnany (2008, p. 1) as the 'process of provisioning and consuming that materialises and substantiates worldview for managing meaning and shaping interpretation'. The concept of ritual economies, in Well's (2007, p. 3) view, help us understand the materialisation of ideologies – how symbols are transformed into objects of material value – and I add, how objects of material value are transformed into symbols and experience. Further, Sabloff (2008) claims that the idea of ritual economy should be pushed further to include the ritualization of materiality. One example from chod is how the human body became ritualised through the use of bones (femurs) as the primary materials for making kanglins. Through the

ritualization of the femur or the skull, a network of human remains acquisition and transformation developed in the Boudhanath area, which further lead to a political discussion on if and how human remains should be publicly used in ritual, ending with an eventual ban on the use and acquisition of such ritual objects. The ban on human remains further transformed and developed an underground market for such objects in Boudhanath.

In a broader sense, the economy of chod involves modes of teaching, means of making the ritual objects, a system of monasteries and centres where chod is practised or taught, and categories of practitioners or enthusiasts. Alongside these, a high amount of human labour is required to produce and sustain the practice of rituals, from craftsmen, shop assistance, web developers, cooks, raw materials providers, monastic administrators, architects, fundraisers, painters, practitioners, chod teachers or Rinpoches, all of whom are involved in the chod network. While some are motivated to partake in the ritual for economic incentives (money), they are usually more interested in generating good karma, higher rebirths or reaching a state of emptiness. The outcome of chod can be seen as a conversion of resources (personal, communal, as well as karmic/spiritual) and labour into merit-making, good karma, the development of benefits (i.e., compassion, jealousy), financial stimulus, as well as status and power.

In Graeber's (2001) view, objects gain value via the social context they are embedded in as well as a result of their dynamic, rather than static, life. Graeber (ibid) points out that in order to examine the value of an object, there are two paths to explore: one that enquires into the social context in which and how an object is used, and one that explores how the context and the usage of the object has changed over time. Value is defined as flexible, multiple and changing, and it cannot be understood without considering the actions undertaken as part of

the production, distribution, use or disposal of an object. The objects needed for chod (i.e., thangkas, damarus, kanglings) are valued by the craftsman on several levels: financial value, karmic gains, and an increase in status and recognition in the local community. Conversely, the value that producers give to their crafts changes when the objects are used by practitioners. For example, chopas predominantly ascribe use value to their objects as aiders in karmic debt payment and in merit gaining.

Alongside the ritual objects, the spaces where chod is practised (monasteries, chod centres, cemeteries, or personal practice spaces) are also subject to social-economic changes, such as the modification of monastic spaces to become chod specific ritual centres or chod altars. Here, ritual spaces are inscribed with value. For example, a chod altar is considered a place where deities reside and therefore demands respect and offerings. Thus, practice spaces should be scrutinised to understand how chod is materialised, and how this materialisation substantiates chod worldview.

I start the discussion with a section on the ritual economy of ritual objects. I then provide an overview of chod practice spaces and temple architecture, with an emphasis on how new establishments are built as well as a focus on the economics behind sponsoring new establishments. Due to space limitations, other practice spaces like cremation grounds, cemeteries, or private spaces, will not be analysed here.

Overall, I analyse the embeddedness of chod in the social, economic, and political spheres of Boudhanath through the laws of karma and merit-making. I argue that karmic orthopraxis materialises and substantiates people's worldviews in Boudhanath. For chod practitioners, chod is one of the main methods used to pay one's karmic debt from previous lives and to

create merit for future lives. I ask the following questions: What are the ritual economies of Buddhism and chod and how do they participate in the development of chod spaces? What is the role of the karmic economy in the creation and maintenance of these spaces?

### **1.1 Consumerism and Commodification of rituals and spaces**

Up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, monastic establishments in Tibet and India were largely economically self-sufficient, with access to a vast amount of land for agricultural production as well as trade (Goldstein, 2010, Schopen, 2004). Monasteries also relied upon donations from the lay community as an important source of income. Brox (2017, p. 5) argues that these contributions were predominantly a karmic economic exchange, whereby laypeople gained merit by donating to monasteries – the currency of the karmic economy. An important economic activity undertaken by monasteries to gain capital and to assist with local needs was the production and distribution of ritual objects, such as musical instruments or paintings. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the production of ritual objects was embedded in the local monastic economy. With the global spread of Buddhism, a number of Dharma ritual objects lost their intended ritual usage and became commodities to be exchanged as such (Brox, 2017; Kitiarsa, 2012; Moran, 2010; Reader & Tanabe, 1998). This process of the commodification of Buddhism is not only limited to ritual objects, and now includes tourism/pilgrimage business (Bruntz, 2014; Reader, 2005), the museumification of Buddhism (Covell, 2012) and the circulation, production and consumption of merit (Caple, 2014) or mindfulness-based therapies (Faure, 2017; Purser, 2014).

Ritual objects found in monasteries, such as the image of the Tantric Buddhist deity Vaisravana, known for her wealth-generating benefits, have become popular with Chinese nationals who wish to gain benefits but are not willing to follow the ritual elements required by sutras or tantras (Samuel, 2012). Kitiarsa (2012, pp. 97–98) provides the example of traditional amulets in the Thai Buddhist tradition that were traditionally used for protection and are now branded by local businesses as ‘rich for sure’ or ‘I want to get rich amulets’. While some argue against such practices, Brox (2017) suggests that the increasing marketisation of Buddhism has revitalised local economies as well as promoted Buddhism worldwide. Brox offers the example of the rebranding of Ladakh, India, as a spiritual tourist destination, which increased tourism and grew the local economy. Such practices were also observed during my fieldwork in Boudhanath, where the government branded Nepal as ‘the birthplace of Lord Buddha’. Since the construction of the first temples in the area 50 years ago, the local economy of Boudhanath has rapidly developed into the popular tourist destination it is today.

Delcore (2004) argues that all Asian religions and cultural landscapes are subject to globalised market economy rules. In Delcore’s (2004) view, competition is one of the main factors that reshapes religion as well as people’s attitudes towards it. Yeshe and Pema informed me about the secretive nature of chod empowerments: “15 years ago only a few people would know of chod, and very few would get empowerments, usually behind closed doors. Today, thousands of people receive empowerments in a public space. The times have changed”. Empowerment (tib. wang), refers to the ritual of giving one the power to perform a specific practice, a form of initiation. Empowerments are usually associated with Vajrayana (tantric Buddhism), and they are a mode of transmitting the lineage from one person to another, as well as a method put in place to make sure that only the trained practitioners gain access to higher tantric

practices. My empowerment into the practice of chod took place in the courtyard of Sherpa Monastery, the main temple associated with the Mother's group, and 3000 people attended it. The lama performing the ritual was HH Dudjom Rinpoche, and due to his popularity, many came to receive blessing from him, to bring offerings, and to create merit for their future lives, as well as to get empowered to practice chod. Anyone who wished to get the empowerment would get it, no questions asked. The audience was diverse, and the crowd was divided into male and female, nuns and monks, as well as locals and about 300 foreigners. While students would traditionally have to go through a detailed process in order to gain empowerment to perform chod, today this is no longer the case, and the rules and restrictions of practising chod are continually relaxed.

The case of chod empowerment is not unique, many monasteries in Bouddhanat bring teachers from India, Tibet, Bhutan and other places to give teachings or empowerments for the benefit of the community, as well as to attract more followers from other monasteries. The range of activities monasteries offer to the lay population is diverse, and from my observations at Ka-Nying Shedrub, they range from Tibetan classes, Dharma classes, earthquake survival classes, chod lessons, or seminars. Religious activities on offer range from empowerments, pujas, a lama visit, to a pilgrimage to Buddha's relics or educational workshops. Such activities also benefit monasteries economically. For example, the chod empowerment ceremony where I received empowerment attracted around 3000 people a day, and a few thousand more did not attend the ceremony but came to bring offerings and receive blessings from the lama. For each day of the event, those present left a mountain of envelopes with cash wrapped in kathas. Such donations help sustain the monastery financially and generate merit for the participants and donors. Similar activities of making offerings are



present at all ceremonies, be it the visit of a lama in person, or for public teachings/gatherings. Ka-Nying Shedrub monastery is one of the most frequented by foreigners, and special measures were put in place to make sure “Western” comfort standards are met. These ranged from “Western” toilets, a restaurant with high hygiene standards and locally sourced fresh food, live translations of pujas in up to eight languages, live screening of events on plasma TVs outside the monastery, a live Facebook feed, as well as a range of ‘high standard’ accommodation.

The case of Boudhanath is not isolated. Buddhist consumerism and its adaptation to the demands of modernity can also be observed in the Theravada tradition, especially in Thailand’s new market economy. Taylor (2007) argues that the construction of the Wat Pra Dhammakaya, in Pathum Thani Province, can be seen as a ‘Disneyland’ of syncretic and prefabricated Buddhism. The fabrication of such monuments is linked to the consumerist trends affecting Buddhism, where increasingly only certain parts of Dharma are practiced, such as making offerings or visiting temples. In the case of Cambodia, Kent (2006, p. 355) observes a movement from Buddhist orthodoxy towards the consumption of Dharma from the standpoint of new ethics and motivations developed by the lay community. In response to this, many Buddhist leaders oppose the transformation and adaptation of their religion to the market economy, negating the idea of Buddhism as ‘merchandise’ (Chidester, 2005). The recent developments of Buddhism in Boudhanath, especially in the case of Ka-Nying Shedrub, are vivid examples of the adaptation of monastery life to market logics.

## 1.2 New monastic spaces

Monasteries often have special rooms and spaces devoted to certain deities or specific rituals. Nevertheless, the construction of dedicated chod spaces is a recent development in Boudhanath. During my fieldwork, I did not hear of any places explicitly built for chod apart from the Mother's group chod centre. The centre belongs to the Sherpa community monastery, and the Sherpa group sponsors it. The Sherpa community practices chod at the centre on the auspicious 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> (Dakini day) days of the Tibetan calendar. The construction of the Mother's centre is a new development in the Boudhanath area, as well as in traditional Buddhist monastic establishments more generally. The centre is located on the third floor of a house, 25 minutes walking distance from the stupa, and it is designed explicitly for chod practice. It only has two rooms: a big hall where the practice takes place, and a storage room for different ritual items or other materials needed for the centre. The room accommodates a permanent complete chod altar, with all the required elements for Troma Nagmo chod, as well as a complete thangka of Troma Nagmo, the deity specific to this practice.

During practices, the lama sits on his throne in the middle to the right, with the male elders of the group to his left, who usually sit on wooden benches and pillows. In front of the lama, women sit on mattresses on the floor. The chant master sits in the front row. The chant master at the Mother's group is usually a woman, the daughter of the previous chant master (one of the elders of the group). A monk or a male usually takes on the role of the chant master, but in this case, since 95% of the group is female, the chant master is a woman. Nearby sits the Karma Vajra, the person in charge of the ritual aspects of chod and the caretaker of the altar. The role of Karma Vajra is usually taken by a monk in traditional

settings, but at the Mother's group the role is split between a nun and an older woman. The roles played by women in this setting could be seen as similar to those of nuns in nunneries, where nuns take over the male roles in the development of chod, such as the Vajra Master or chant master.

The Sherpa community is renowned for their wealth in Boudhanath: individual donations often amounted to hundreds or thousands of dollars. Due to the wealth of the group and their devotion to chod, Lama Pema (the Rinpoche in charge of the group) decided to build a chod specific retreat for the Sherpa community. He bought a piece of land outside Boudhanath to transform it into a retreat centre. In one of the last chod sessions I attended, the lama announced that he was ready to start building the centre, and that the community had raised enough money for the construction of the temples. The construction of the main temple will be followed by a set of individual rooms for up to 12 practitioners. The construction of the retreat centre is meant to be finished in a few years, depending on the amount raised from the sponsors. After my fieldwork finished, I heard that another chod centre had opened in the Boudhanath area. Outside these centres, chod became a widespread practice in guesthouses or private house around Boudhanath.

The growth in chod's popularity is slowly reshaping the urban space of Boudhanath. This process has generated challenges, and it may encourage the transformation of the practice of chod into a commodity, similar to the mindfulness movement (Purser, 2014), or in the way that thangka paintings are commercialised as art pieces (Harris, 2006, 2012). In the next sections, I engage in a discussion of karmic economies, followed by a discussion on the production and distribution of chod ritual objects. I ask: What happens when chod, and

Buddhism overall, is alienated from the karmic economy and is subject to the market economy?

## **2. An introduction to karmic economy**

The recent spread of Tibetan monasticism in Boudhanath had a significant influence on the expansion of new markets, development of local economies, and it has created new sectors of consumption and distribution (i.e. builders, painters, sculptors) (Brox, 2017). While money became a key part of the engine of ritual goods production, offered both as an object of devotion and as a way of recognition for services, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition also operates on a merit (tib. Bsod nams) and karma (tib. Las) based system (Spiro, 1966). The karmic system translates any aspect of human life into a moral economy that either aids or prevents one from obtaining a state of emptiness or enlightenment during this life or future ones, as well as a human or non-human rebirth (S. G. Carlisle, 2008). In the karmic economy, all actions performed or thought during one's life are split based on the intention behind them, as either 'good, bad or neutral' (Keyes, 1983). The literature on Buddhism underlines the social benefits of the karmic economy, evident in people's interaction with one another and their surrounding world (Gombrich, 1975; Sharma, 1997). Keyes (1983, p. 268) values the benefits of the 'social recognition of being a person of virtue' over the state of mind developed by the faith in karma. Obeyesekere (1968, 2002) moves beyond the social requirements of karma to argue for its purpose as a logical necessity, where the cycles of death and rebirth are ethicized by the laws of karma.

Wagner (in Jurgen von Hagen, 2013, p. 202) refers to the Chinese Buddhist karmic system as an 'abstract and transcultural moral currency that links existence of sentient beings over time within the cycle of transmigration'. The karmic economy, as Wagner (2013) points out, is grounded in merit accumulation and debt accumulation, where merit is defined as a good deed and debt as a bad deed. The merit 'currency' of karma is based on actions performed in previous lives that most people do not remember, and the actions performed today that will affect future lives that people may not be aware of. The karmic economy is thus located in a 'beyond' temporality of uncertain validity. The laws of karma, as defined by Wagner (2013, p. 202), are based on the effort and intention put into performing actions, making goods and providing services, or the use of money (or not) in the intrinsic economic value of the action in question. Alongside offerings, religious activities are charged with karmic value, and they can help one pay off karmic debt or accumulate great merit for the future. Carlisle, (2012, p. 318), in his study of Thai Buddhism in Bangkok, argues that karma is not only a system of economic exchange but a belief system that shapes the way the self makes sense of reality. Karma, in Carlisle's (2008, p. 194) view, is constructed both at the personal level as well as the cultural level, allowing individuals to interpret reality based on previous and current behaviours, while it also leaves space for the negotiation of one's agency in his or her past, present and future actions.

Chod, embedded in the Buddhist system, is governed by the karma economy. Chod aids the practitioner to tap into the karmic 'debt' by either gaining merit through practice, or by making offerings – the most important being offering one's body in visualisations. The practice of cutting one's body and offering it to beings from different realms may pay off karmic debt accumulated in the past. For example, the act of visualising one's body as food

for beings to feed off, can be understood as a mode of paying the being for a wrongdoing in the past. The merit accumulated during chod is based on one's dedication, the effort put into the practice, the offerings made, as well as the way the chopas behave with other beings. The merit created via chod, as well as any Tibetan Buddhist practice, should be dedicated towards the benefits of all sentient beings. The texts of chod are structured in three parts; the first part helps the practitioner find the right motivation for the practice, usually one that aids all sentient beings and is not selfish. Ritual practice fosters the motivation to help one cut attachments from the self as well as to aid other beings on their path, and it ends with a section dedicated to benefits directed towards all sentient beings, including the practitioner. In this way, the karmic economy of chod connects one's actions to another's karma, and through visualisations it aids the practitioner to tap into the actions done in previous lives and pay back karmic debt for any wrongdoings in the past.

Karmic benefits are also spread through the network of economic relations in which chod is embedded in wider society. The producers see the ritual objects made for chod practitioners as a way of creating merit and benefiting the community. Later in the chapter, we meet Lhamo (a kangling maker), Ananada (a damaru maker), and Chime (a thangka painter). For all three artisans, the making of Dharma objects is linked to their karma, and it brings them two types of benefits. First, the producers manage to survive and prosper by selling these objects. Second, they accumulate merit by making ritual objects that benefit the practice community. The present-day economic circumstances of the artisans (good or bad) are also attributed to their previous karma. This point is emphasised by Carlisle (2012), who noted that traders in Bangkok attributed their economic success or failure to karmic connections from previous lives.

Another way karma is intertwined with chod is through the practice of giving or donation (Skt. dana) to the monasteries, monks and nuns, and laypeople, by local communities, Buddhist followers, or sponsors during chod rituals. The practice of 'giving up' or giving to Buddhist establishments and high practitioners is considered to create more merit for those giving, unlike giving to beggars, identified as 'giving down' (Bernstein, 2013). This merit-making activity of offering to the monastic establishments is an economic exchange in itself, it is the primary source of financial sustainability for the monasteries and their inhabitants, and is the driver of further monastic developments (i.e., the construction and maintenance of temples) (Brox, 2017). Later in this chapter, I explore how the communities of chopas and their sponsors' merit-making activities of 'giving' lead towards the development and construction of dedicated chod centres for practice and retreat activities.

The karmic economy is one way chod relates to the wider spheres of economic, and social relations in the Boudhanath area, where the production, consumption and distribution of chod materialises and substantiates the worldview of the practice as well as that of Buddhism more generally. In the following sections I explore the ritual economy of chod in terms of materiality and spatiality. By exploring chod as ritual, one can bring into relief the internal processes of visualisation through their connections with the wider social-economic sphere.

### **3. Ritual objects**

#### **3.1 Thangkas**

The following section provides the reader with an introduction to the art of thangka painting production, and commercialisation. As a popular Dharma tourist destination, the Boudhanath area hosts an increasing number of thangka shops, workshops, and painting schools. The

growing demand for thangkas in the area has changed the ways these paintings are produced, distributed, and used, as well as the traditional philosophical underpinning that guided their production. The texts of chod (Dorje & Thayé, 2007) make reference to a number of deities that one needs to visualise, and the thangkas play an essential role in providing the chopas with a physical visual depiction of these deities to help visualisation processes. The following ethnographic example of obtaining a chod thangka (a depiction of the deity Krodikali), presents the reader with some of the challenges the painting tradition has faced in adapting to the market economy and the ways in which the laws of karma are intertwined with these processes. To conclude this section, I follow Harris (2006, 2012) to highlight the consumption of thangkas in the cosmopolitan environment of contemporary art galleries, where the laws of karma lose their value and the objects gain recognition and a new value in the world of modern art and museum critique.

The arrival of Tibetan refugees to the Kathmandu Valley in the 50s created a revival of Tibetan culture outside Tibet. Due to the large number of families that settled in Boudhanath, more monasteries were built in the area, which in turn encouraged the production of thangka paintings. According to Bentor (1993), most Tibetans have an altar and at least one thangka in the house, and monasteries are usually home to a large number and diversity of thangkas. Thangkas, translated as ‘the objects that one unrolls’, are Buddhist paintings typically painted on cotton and decorated with ornaments (i.e., silk, embroideries), depicting deities (wrathful or peaceful), famous teachers, or mandalas. In the Tibetan tradition, some thangkas were also used for medical purposes, to depict body parts, to illustrate illnesses, or herbs and minerals used for treatments (McGuckin, 1996, p. 33). The paintings were designed to be easily transportable as a rolled object. Jackson (1984, p. 9–10) describes the purpose of thangkas as



aids in the accumulation of merit and to avoid obstacles, to provide guidance and assistance for the deceased in Bardo (49 days between one's death and one's rebirth) and for devotional practices or tantric visualisations. On top of Jackson's classification, thangkas are also used to denote status, and in certain circumstances they are used as art or ornament (mostly by non Tibetans). In the Tibetan Buddhist context, thangkas are used as a 'body support' (tib. Sku – a honorific term for the body, rten – support) and Tibetans do not recognize them as 'art' (tib. sgyu rtsal). The body support refers to the aid one receives in meditation or ritual practice through the connection one develops to the enlightened deity depicted in the thangka. For example, in the case of chod, the deity Krodikali acts as a support for the ritual. Traditionally, thangkas are used in tantric visualisations for those at lower levels of practice – novices, until the image of the deity becomes part of one's mind's 'eye', after which the deity can be considered an aspect of one's mind, inseparable from the practitioner (McGuckin, 1996). The image becomes part of the mind's eye through repetition and practice. For example, one mimetically copies part of the deity's body into the visualisation during each chod practice, like the face features, and then moves on to the hand gestures, until one can recall a clear and stable image of the thangka in the visualisation (a process that may take a lifetime).

Thangka images are not always used for their Buddhist purposes, and they can become touristic images, used outside their intended purpose. From my observations, the thangka shops around Boudhanath were mostly frequented by tourists, who often buy them as a souvenir. For a western audience, the paintings are used for meditation purposes or as decorations/gifts, reasons that are not popular amongst Tibetans. In Nepal, thangka shops can be found in most touristic places, like Swayambhu, Patan, Thamel or Durbar Square. The increase in the number of new monasteries and the surge in the number of tourists as well as

online shopping, has naturally developed thangka painting and selling into a profitable business. Alongside the shops, the wider network of thangka production and commercialisation includes thangka schools, the suppliers of tools and colours, the silk cover makers and suppliers, and the monastic community. Bentor (1993, p. 109) categorises the thangkas made in Nepal for 'internal users', usually monasteries and local Buddhists (laypeople or monks), and for 'external users', understood as tourists. The businesses are usually split between those that make thangkas for monasteries, those that make them for laypeople, and those that make them for tourists. Those in the first category are usually elaborate paintings, large in size, specially commissioned, made to high standards and are high in price. The thangkas made for the laypeople are medium to high quality and priced per their budget. The business surrounding tourism is the most profitable, and thangkas are sold at higher prices than for locals, although their quality is at times questionable. The thangka target audience affects the process of thangka acquisition, the quality, the details, the qualifications of the painters, the costs, the benefits behind the thangka, as well as the role of the thangka as either a simple painting or a Buddhist object of worship.

The increased demand for thangkas in the Boudhanath area has changed the way these are made and commissioned. The commercialization of thangkas has affected several traditional processes adopted over time by the Buddhist masters to commission a painting as well as the reasons behind it. During my fieldwork at Tsering Art School, part of Shechen Monastery, I learnt that one must study the technical skills of painting and drawing for six years, and the philosophy behind thangkas for another two. In Tibet, thangka painters were traditionally referred to as 'depicters of gods' (tib. Lha bzo ba), and they used to be highly respected. Some of the great painters were called 'divinely emanated artists' (tib. Sprul pa'l lha bzo) (McGuckin,

1996). Painters were traditionally male monks, yet today one can find both female and male painters, and most of them belong to the lay community rather than the monastic one. Today, painters are not as highly respected as in the past, and their work is often seen as just another job in the market. Accordingly, the artists' income is not as high as it used to be. Tsering Art School is a predominant thangka painting school in Boudhanath, and it is considered one of the few traditional schools left in Nepal. Nevertheless, some of the traditional aspects of thangka painting, such as receiving empowerment from the deity depicted before being allowed to paint it, abstaining for certain foods, taking a retreat for practising the rituals associated with specific tantric deities, making brushes or stone colours, preparing the canvases from animal skin, extracting glue from yak skin, or consulting an astrologer to see which auspicious day is better for finishing and ending the thangka, all fell short even in the traditional school.

Patrons usually commission a thangka on the recommendation of their lama. The lama suggests the appropriate type of thangka according to the situation at hand, such as to progress in their practice or to help with illness. The patron should have pure or good intentions when commissioning a thangka. The painter will talk with the patron about the details and establish a price that pleases both parties involved. Traditionally, a painter needs to be Buddhist initiated in the tantric practice of the deity he or she intends to paint (Jackson & Jackson, 1984, p. 9). From my observations, the Shechen school does not have this requirement. When the painting is finished, the patron chooses the ornaments and the cover. The final stage of the process is the consecration of the painting. This ritual is performed by the lama, usually by inscribing mantras on the back of the painting and by blessing the thangka. During the consecration ritual, the lama invites the deity to come and reside in the

painting. The practice of consecration transforms the thangka from a simple painting into a dharma ritual object for worship. After the consecration, the patron uses the thangka for the specific purpose it was commissioned, and he/she follows a set of worship guidance depending on the deity and the purpose behind commissioning the painting. The thangka is usually hung in an altar room and respected by gifting it offerings or by offering prayers to the deity depicted.

Tseundu, a Tamang man in his 50s, owns a thangka shop and finds the activity of the Tsering School respectful but time-consuming and tedious: "The thangkas the students produce are of high quality, but at times they take too much time to paint". Tseundu prefers people that paint fast. In his shop, conveniently located in the ring of the Boudhanath stupa, Tseundu sells mostly low to medium quality thangkas for tourists. The demand for thangkas is significant, and Tseundu created his workshop of painters, where in a few months or a year one learns to make a thangka. The workshop employs over 20 people, and they also provide westerners with thangka painting lessons for 4 weeks for a significant amount of money (\$350). In comparison, Tsering Art School also offers lessons for those that wish to learn for \$30 per month. While traditionally the patron would meet the painter and discuss the details of the thangkas and the cost of the commission, in Tseundu's workshop, the painters make thangkas for a quick sale and thus the connection between the painter and the patron has changed due to market forces.

The painters in Tseundu's shop are paid by the day or per thangka, and they produce a range of popular thangkas. His thangkas, even the lower quality ones, maintain the characteristics of the deities and the basic painting principals. For Tseundu, the quality of the painting can be seen in the lines, while other schools of painting recognize quality in the shading (Bentor

1993, p 117). Tseundu's sales increase each year due to the increased number of tourists. The thangkas he sells are not consecrated, nor does he have a quality check on them. By selling non-consecrated thangkas, the paintings are simple objects; thus, it is not inappropriate to cheat buyers or haggle over them. During the first chats I had with him, he insisted that a local master makes the paintings he sells in his own studio. My skilled vision, developed during my classes with Yeshe and my visits to Shechen art school, came in handy and I could observe some elements that looked 'wrong'. When we started to look over the thangkas, I realised that some of them contained mistakes or had missing elements, such as the fire that all thangkas must have. In time, Tseundu informed me that he is predominantly interested in selling to tourists that do not know much about thangkas. He took one of the paintings from the back and showed it to me, explaining that he painted it with his hands and he would like to sell it to someone that might make good use of it. At the time of the conversations, I was gathering elements for a personal altar, and I required a Shakyamuni Buddha thangka – the thangka that Tseundu had painted – as per Yeshe's recommendation. I offered to buy it from Tseundu, and we negotiated the price to 25000 NRP (\$250). I sent some pictures to Yeshe, asked if he approved of the thangka, and he suggested that I should go ahead and buy it. I revisited the shop in the following days, and found Tseundu's wife, Shena, overseeing the shop. Shena showed me the same thangka, and did not want to lower the price more than 37000 NRP (\$370). After I told her about my conversation with her husband, she called him and agreed to sell it for the initially agreed price. Images made in the thangka shops around the stupa are created with a specific tourist audience in mind, and as such they cater for 'western' budgets. In this context, thangkas become commodities in the tourist market and they are embedded with meanings different from their traditional use. Bentor (1993, p. 118)

argues that from the 1980s, shopkeepers in the Kathmandu Valley started to sell stories of the 'authenticity' of paintings made by poor Tibetans in the mountains that 'keep the old ways of life far away from the modern world'. While the discourse of authenticity is not one I am keen to pursue here, I find it appropriate to underline that, in this context, thangkas have evolved into souvenirs and art pieces and they should be understood as such. The question that remains unanswered here is what is the agency of the image in this scenario where thangkas become 'simple objects'.

After I received my initiation/empowerment (tib. wang) to practice chod, my teacher asked me to get a Krodikali thangka. I visited the local thangka shops, and none of them had heard of the deity. Most of them had thangkas depicting Machik Labdron, the founder of chod and the most popular chod practice in Boudhanath. I showed them an image of the thangka, and one shopkeeper suggested that they could paint it for me, but it would be very costly, and it would take some time to complete as they did not know a painter with the specific knowledge needed for painting this thangka. I checked with my thangka teacher, Chime, to see if he knew this deity and if he would be willing to paint it. Chime looked at the picture of the thangka and told me that he had never painted one, but that he could do it for me. He asked me to consult with my chod teacher and ask what details were needed, because the copy of the image I had depicted the full thangka, with over 20 deities. These details would make the thangka very costly and take many months to complete. Following Yeshe's instructions, I asked Chime to paint the main deity (Krodikali), the emanation deity (Vajravarahi), and the two lineage holders (the two Dudjom Rinpoches). Chime painted the thangka while taking inspiration from a printed version of the thangka, one that the mothers in the chod group used during chod to visualise. It took about two months for Chime to finish the painting. He

walked me through all the steps of painting the thangka as well as the view and mindset one needs to have while doing the job (more on this in chapter 4). At the end of the process, he asked me on which auspicious day I would prefer him to “open the eyes” of the thangka, a process of painting the interior of the eyes of the deities in the thangka. My chod teacher suggested that they should be painted on the Dakini day since Krodikali is a Dakini (a female energy being).

The interaction between my teacher, Chime and the thangkas brings me back to a discussion of the agency of images. In this case, I was the intermediary between my teacher and the painter. Agency here becomes relational, where the most important elements of the painting were negotiated in terms of their value, the amount of money I was willing to pay, and the amount of time the painter was willing to spend on the painting. Yet, while I was the necessary intermediary in this case, the painting did not change in value. From the complex painting with over 20 deities, we negotiated that Chime paint the main deity, two supporting deities and the lineage holders. In this case, Yeshe reassured me that the painting projects the same agency regardless of its level of complexity or detail. In this case, an image to be considered ‘right’ it means that the main deity, the emanation and the lineage holders needed to be depicted. This raises the question of agency the printed pictures that the Mother’s group practitioners use for visualisations instead of the thangka paintings. While the images are complex, they are not consecrated or painted in the traditional way, yet they have similar agency in the eyes of the practitioners as the thangka from which they were mimetically copied.

Following the ‘opening of the eyes’, I went together with Chime to a local shop, where we selected embroidered silk in colours that fit the pattern of the colours in the thangka, and

then he took me to one of his collaborators who helped assemble the thangka. The final task was to select wooden rods and the decorative knobs and when attached, Yeshe took the thangka to his Rinpoche, who consecrated it for me. The whole process, from the time of commissioning to the consecration, took two and a half months and cost me 35000 NRP (\$350). During the rest of the fieldwork, I learnt that only 25% of my informants own thangkas of their chod deity and that most people usually use a printed photograph of the deity for visualisations at home. The pictures are more common due to their low cost and ease of transportation.

The production, distribution and consumption of thangkas, as exemplified above, has adapted to the needs of the marketplace. Painters like Chime consider the art of thangka-making a high merit activity, and they follow the traditional steps to make sure the patron of the thangka is pleased, that the deity is pleased with their work, and to make sure they secure future thangka orders to be able to earn money and to support their families. Chime is aware that the thangkas he paints are not used as decorations or souvenirs, but as objects of worship and prayer, sacred items where deities will be invited to reside during the consecration ceremony.

Thangkas may take a different road in the art world, where neither merit-making and karmic debt paying matter, the contemporary art world. Claire Harris' work explores the subject of Himalayan art and Tibetan artists in the contemporary art world (2006, 2012). Harris argues that to be exhibited in the most well-known and fashionable art galleries, Tibetan artists have to obey specific rules and submit to expectations set by the art world – rules that are often not in concordance with Buddhist practices. Harris presents the case of the artist Gonkar Gyatso, who was invited to showcase his thangka related work in Venice because of his status



as a refugee from a troubled political space: Tibet. However, Gyatso was not able to exhibit at Rubin Museum (New York's Himalayan art museum) because his work is neither classical Tibetan nor does it reflect the hyper-modernist movement art collectors are interested in. Nevertheless, his work was applauded in Beijing, where the paintings were understood and critiqued in a context of Chinese art criticism, and not the art scene of the West (Harris, 2012, p. 162). Harris's example underlines the fact that the art field in the 'ingi' art world is understood through concerns with temporality, consumption, aesthetics and exoticism. Here the laws of karma or Dharma are disregarded, and thangkas gain value as objects of art, not as sacred/auspicious ritual objects. In these specific cases, as opposed to the example of the Kordikali thangka offered above, the agency of the image is diluted, and thangka as art objects are created to be judged on their aesthetic values, closely relatable to touristic images. The relational agency between the chod master, the patron and the painter is broken and the thangkas develop agency through the persona of the painter.

### **3.2 Damaru and Kangling**

The objects one needs to practice chod can vary from nothing to a full-scale altar. A chopa may select ritual objects based on his level of practice as well as the place of practice. In a monastery or a private ritual space, typically one can find the image of a deity, a damaru (chod drum), a kangling (tight bone flute), a bell, a vajra, and the sadhana of chod (text). In places like a cremation ground, other objects are required, such as a kapala (skull cup), a chopa tent, and other materials for protection. In a monastery, a specialized chold altar and a variety of offerings are provided. Advanced practitioners may not need any objects in order to practice

chod. Alongside their importance in the wider chod economy, the damaru and the kangling are important ritual objects entangled in networks of agency, such as between the object and the practitioners, the objects and spirits, and the objects and the market economy.

The following section will focus on the producers of kanglings and damarus. Due to their specialized nature, unlike the thangkas, these objects have not become popular commodities, and both locals and tourists purchase them predominantly for chod rituals. The production of damarus is more widespread than that of kanglings, and they are displayed publicly in shops around Boudhanath. The kanglings are made out of human bones – a left femur – and for that reason they are illegal objects and their production and distribution are kept underground. However, plastic kanglings are available for sale. The damaru and kangling producers I conducted fieldwork with manage their businesses to gain capital as well as to produce merit for future lives. While the damaru makers do not practice chod themselves and mostly engage in the business because of the demand for these products, the kangling producer has a moral obligation to produce these objects for his own chod practice and for others, beyond the necessity to earn a living. While the final object value for the chopas may be the same, the motivation and value behind the production of the objects are changing how business is performed.

Ananada, a specialised shopkeeper and damaru producer has seen his business grow rapidly in recent years. Ananada learnt the craft of making damarus in his village in the Himalayas, and decided to come to Kathmandu to start a business in a small shop selling his damarus. When I met him, Ananada had been in business for 7 years, and by then had employees – younger family members – who made the drums for him. He was also considering expanding and moving the shop for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time. Ananada specialises in medium quality drums, sold for

3 000-7 000 rupees (\$30-70), sold mostly to monasteries and tourists. Ananada is grateful for the profitable business that supports his family. He also considers his work to be of high merit gaining, especially when he attends pujas where the lamas use his drums for ceremonies. All his drums are of medium sound quality, and he offers a fair price to his buyers. In this instance, the agency of the damarus is expanded to incorporate activities of merit-making, which have a direct impact on the karmic economy.

A few streets closer to the stupa, Tsomo, a Tibetan lady in her 30s, owns a Dharma shop with an emphasis on chod. Her shop is spacious and abundant in the diversity and number of objects. Most of the products Tsomo sells are made in workshops she owns with her husband, where they employ local Tibetans. Tsomo's products are high end, and a drum could cost up to 20 000 rupees (\$200). The choice of wood, the size of the drum, the quality of the skin, as well as the decorations (ranging from plastic to silver or gold) mean a Tsomo's damaru can cost significantly more than those sold by Ananada. For a drum to be considered good quality, the sound should be 'good' (this theme will be treated elsewhere). While a good sounding drum could be sold for 4 000 rupees (\$40), the extra elements, such as the drum's offerings (decorations), may enrich the patron's merit and good karma. The quality and decorations of a drum are also seen as marks of status and devotion. Dharma businesses have changed as some practitioners became wealthy: chopas started to ask for more sophisticated decorations (i.e., silver, gold) on their ritual objects, driving the local economy to produce high cost objects. The popularity of chod and the increase in wealth shaped the local economy of musical instruments, enriching the musical instruments with higher status and agency through expensive decorations. Both Tsomo and Ananada have seen an increase in their sales over the past seven years. Tsomo set up a website, and she currently sells chod related objects

to markets in Europe and America (California predominately). During our last conversation, Tsomo was overwhelmed by the number of orders she received and found it hard to satisfy the demand from outside Nepal.

Neither Ananada nor Tsomo sees themselves as chopas. Tsomo informed me that she used to practice at times, but she has rarely done so in recent years. Both of them rely on the developing market of chopas and foreigners to make a living and are not that much concerned with the practice itself. The activities of merit-making and capital gaining is sufficient for them. Some of their profits go back to monasteries they support via donations, thus putting the money back into the local system and also gaining merit. In this case, the economy of chod is circular: the practice drives a need for ritual objects while the some of the profits from locals selling these objects are reinvested in monasteries.

The production and sale of kanglings is more complicated than that of damarus. The Nepali government banned 15 years ago the practice of using human remains as part of religious rituals. The ban is not enforced equally, and I found human remains (half skulls – kapalas) either on display or used during ritual practices in public ceremonies and monasteries. Most of my informants owned a kangling and they were not scared to use it in public spaces. However, their commercialisation is forbidden, and those found doing business with or using human remains could be imprisoned for up to two years. Yet, I asked around if anyone being found or punished under this new law but I did not receive any positive responses. During my first visit to Tsomo's shop, she gave me a tour of the shop, and I could see plastic kanglings on display for sale. I asked her about kanglings made out of bone, and she said that I could get one if I want to, but it would cost between 16 000 and 23 000 rupees (\$160-230) (depending on the ornaments). During my talks with Tsomo, she was not willing to give details

as to where the bone kanglings come from or to show me how they are made. When I talked to my teacher about the kanglings, he offered to introduce me to a producer his monastery usually purchases from. Due to the secrecy around the kanglings, the craftsman was reluctant to meet me. After a few phone calls and a long explanation as to why I wanted to meet him, I was allowed to spend a day at his workshop and to witness the production of one kangling.

Lhamo, a former monk, arrived in Nepal from Bhutan around 15 years ago. He learnt the craft of making kanglings when he was a young monk. The market for kanglings was tiny when he arrived in Nepal, and not many people knew how to produce such objects, nor were there many chopas in the area. Lhamo started to make them because he needed the instrument for this own chod practice. Soon his friends asked him to produce more, and he slowly developed his business. However, unlike Ananada or Tsomo, he never expanded his business and today is very selective with his customers. Lhamo informed me that he only produces between two and five a month, and he sells them at a price between 10 000 and 12 000 rupees (\$100-120). Over recent years he has received many orders, but he is not interested in making money and keeps his production to a minimum. Lhamo repeatedly expressed concern about the illegality of the trade and justified his small production line as a way of paying for his day-to-day expenses and gaining merit. While the risk is high, Lhamo sees his craft as a moral duty because the ritual practice requires the object, and thus, someone has to take the burden of producing it. On top of his karmic and financial motivations, Lhamo also informed me that the people whose bones are used also benefit from his work and they gain merit in their future lives, given that their bodies are used for Dharma to the benefit of other beings. In certain circumstances, he informed me that some people give their bodies before they die for people to make Dharma objects out of them to gain merit. Here we can witness another level of

agency, where people intentionally look for their bones to be used for chod to gain merit in their future lives.

While the kangling maker has agency over the objects he makes out of human bones, Ladwig (2015) points out that the focus of literature on religious practices is predominantly fixated on the agency of human actors rather than material objects. As previously mentioned, I follow the line of thought that agency is relational, and I now detail the agency created through kanglings and use literature on Buddhist relics and statues as a comparative elements (McDaniel, 2011a, 2011b). McDaniel, in his study of the agency of relics in Thailand, argues that relics have khwan or soul substance, and they may be able to influence their surroundings through being embedded in a network of power relations. Kanglings, while not defined as relics, are the instruments that allow the chopas to reach into the spirit world through sounding the bone trumpet. In this way, kanglings fall under the power of enchantment in Gell's (1998) theory of agency, whereby through their connection to death they are deemed powerful instruments to lure spirits in. This is particularly important in cremation ground practices, where chopas aim to tame the spirits that lurk around cremation grounds. The sound of the kangling 'lures' them into the chopas's trap. The bones may also bring bad karma if the person they belonged to had bad karma. Lhamo argued that it is an art to be able to differentiate between good bones and bad bones, and it is highly important, as a bone that belonged to a person with bad karma can have atrocious effects on the practitioner. This discussion enriches the agency of the instruments to include the karma of the dead person.

## 4. Conclusion

Agency, in the context of both the kangling and the damaru, is also constituted at the level of body shaping. Both musical instruments require the chopas to shape their bodies in particular ways to produce the sounds required for the practice, creating at the same time particular ways of hearing and seeing. The production and acquisition of the musical instruments have a direct impact on one's karma and the economy of merit making, through the offerings that are made during purchase, or the effort put into making the musical instruments. Finally, the agency of the damaru and the kangling expands to the market economy, in shaping the labour market, how business is conducted and the type of shops that open in the Boudhanath area.

Over the past 15 years, the practice of chod produced a new market for the ritual objects. Chod permeated the local economy of Boudhanath, and more chod-related shops open their doors to respond to the demand. As demonstrated above, the value and mode of conducting business changes according to the relation one has to chod. For example, Lhamo is not looking to get rich or expand his business, and he is interested in aiding those that need a bone kangling to practice chod and in making enough money to survive. His intention to produce comes from a moral obligation, and the value of the objects he produces are substantiated by his dedication to the practice of chod. Ananada and Tsomo, on the other hand, conduct their business for capital gains as well as karmic gains, and they lack the attitude Lhamo has thanks to his devotion to chod and his monastic background. By reflecting on the examples of chod valuable objects, one can see how the worldview of chod and karma is substantiated and materialised, and how this is affected by or affects the way chod business is performed

in Boudhanath. In the next chapter, I move the discussion from ritual economies to acts of seeing and hearing.



## Chapter 4: Ways of seeing in chod

*It rained all day; the air was fresh and humid. My back was already sweating under the weight of my backpack and the handle of my tripod case rubbed uncomfortably on my shoulder. The wind made the heat of July bearable, and the walk from my house to the big bell, a popular meeting place, was rather enjoyable. It also carried the smoke from the incense burning in the Dharma shops close by to permeate the skin and senses of those doing circumambulations. Chants, prayers, and mantra recitations could be heard alongside the casual afternoon chats, beggars' requests, and the noisy group of white tourists with big cameras around their necks. All of this enriched the meditative summer afternoon soundscape of the stupa area. I reached our meeting spot at 4 in the afternoon, but I knew that chopa Tenzin would be late. Time is not always as 'exact' as I am used to in this part of Nepal; people take the liberty to arrive late, and this is socially acceptable. Tenzin, dressed in his usual chopa white clothes, arrived around 35 minutes late and we started our 40 minute journey down muddy roads towards the Sherpa Community's Cremation Ground.*

*Chopa Tenzin was born in Tibet in 1972 and arrived in Nepal's Tibetan refugee camp in 1981. Raised in a chopa family, his mother and father practiced chod regularly in their house and the community. During his time at home, Tenzin became familiar with the sounds of bells and drums, which he often listened to, until he left his family behind and fled his home in search of a better future. During school holidays he would travel from Dharamshala, a Tibetan refugee*

camp in the north of India, to Boudhanath, to receive chod teachings from lama Wangdu. When he finished school, Tenzin didn't take his Buddhist education too seriously, and he even engaged in several illicit behaviours. In his words, he used to behave like "the mafia", engaging in street fights, drinking, and other prohibited behaviours. For a long time, Tenzin was consumed by lust. Around eight years ago his wife left him, at which point he became aware of his inappropriate behaviours and their consequences, and Tenzin decided to devote himself completely to becoming a chopa. Since then, chod has drastically changed his life: "I feel regret when I see people behaving like I used to. I feel their fury. I feel I should've never married; it was a mistake to do so at that time. I don't have time for that type of behaviour now, I see the uncertainty of death... . I survive close to death when I practice chod and I feel very happy, fresher... I have a new life".

Tenzin walked me through all the steps of his chod practice that rainy afternoon. He had started at home before we met. Amongst other visualisations, he had sent a trap to the place we were heading in a form of a nine bounded vajra net, similar to a fisherman's net, to capture the spirits surrounding the cremation ground. From the moment he performed this task, Tenzin needed to be careful not to lose grip of the net and release the spirits. His walking became rather chaotic – at times he walked in a zigzag, at times he would turn around and walk back and forth again. He visualised breathing in pure air, in the form of the 'om' (ॐ) and 'hung' (ཀྲ) syllables, while reciting mantras. He had learnt to spot the distractions that spirits send to interrupt his focus or impede him from reaching the practice ground. On the way we encountered several people he knew that wanted to talk or invite him for tea, but he politely refused, telling me that because spirits are not allowed to show their form, they had surely

*sent others to distract him or take forms of beings that might break his concentration. As we made our way down the road talking, Tenzin visualised that several infinite Buddhas and dakinis were following us to the cremation spot. Midway through the journey, Tenzin blew his kangling to alert the spirits of our approach: the sound of the bone lured them into waiting so they would not escape from his trap. When we got close to the cremation ground, he blew the kangling a few more times and intensified his chopra specific walk. Tenzin stopped at the entrance and gazed into the cemetery. The place was empty of humans, and two cremation spots could be seen in the middle, with their roofs and pillars blackened by the smoke of human flesh and sandalwood. Ashes lay under the metal frames used for cremation as a reminder of impermanence. Tenzin had to memorise the whole cremation ground before nightfall. He needed to know each wall, each shape, and each stone to not be deceived by spirits, maras or other malevolent beings when night arrived. Tenzin was familiar with the cremation ground and he memorised it well, down to the smallest detail: he could walk around with his eyes closed and know exactly where everything was.*

*Understanding what is real and what is illusory is not an easy task and there is no comfortable way to learn it, says Tenzin. Spirits manifest in many ways, and it took him many years to learn the signs. Tenzin would visit his lama, who would help him work out what was a sign and what was not. In Tenzin's view, spirits manifest as dogs, thunder, strange sounds, variations in temperature, shapes, and people. At times they do not show up for days and he would need to perform special rituals to lure them in. Tenzin told me several stories of happenings in that specific cremation spot.*

*One of these stories told of how one day he came to practice at the same time as a body of a man was being cremated. The family had left at dawn and the man's body kept burning with no supervision. Tenzin saw that the fire was slowing down and the body had still not reduced to ashes, so he took it upon himself to help and stirred the fire. When he approached the body and poked it, the person's stomach exploded, covering him in burning hot stomach juices. At that time, Tenzin was naked and only covered in a thin layer of ashes from the cremation ground, as per the chod instructions. The fluids burnt his skin and smelt terrible. He understood it was a sign and so let his condition be without getting distracted from his practice. Tenzin went to clean himself with a cloth and continued his chod practice as if nothing happened.*

*On another occasion, Tenzin was sat practising at night when he heard the sounds of a skeleton walking on the pavement. A thin guy came up to him, got completely naked and threw himself into the ashes in the cremation spot and started to dance while different shapes and shades appeared around him. Tenzin's memory of the place came in handy, and he distinguished the shapes and illusions that were not meant to be there. He kept calm and continued his practice, looking at the spirit manifesting itself naked in front of him with compassion. A few moments later, the spirit left and everything went back to normal. According to Tenzin, spirits use all types of methods and tricks to deceive him and provoke emotions of fear, compassion, lust, or disgrace. Tenzin sees all that is around him as pure: "the meaning of what we see is attributed by our mind and it is not good or bad by default". According to the chopa, the body is made up of a mixture of elements: "think about faeces,*

*one would encounter them and feel like ew, but I don't have a problem eating them or anything else, I would visualise them as momos (traditional Tibetan dumplings) and make peace with it – it is all in your mind”.*



Fig 3.1 Chopa Tenzin practicing chod in a cremation ground



Fig 3.2 Chopa Tenzin practicing chod in a cremation ground

The above vignette introduces the reader to the world of chod from Tenzin's perspective. As well as describing orthodoxy, the details narrated highlight the sensory organisation Tenzin needs to make sense of his practice. Tenzin emphasises a mode of knowing through seeing by immersing his body in the world that unfolds in front of him during practice. The years of skilled visions Tenzin has acquired are the result of a mimetic mode of learning promoted by Buddhist teachers. Alongside vision, such as in the case of visualisations, the sonic (i.e., speech/music or the sounds of the environment), the tactile and the olfactory faculties structure the way Tenzin experiences chod. Tenzin ascribes the spiritual manifestation in his stories to his karma and the power of the chod ritual. His performance of chod became one of the pre-conditioned causes for the manifestations narrated above. From the moment he

started practising chod at home, Tenzin expected several manifestations to appear before his eyes. As a result of these appearances, Tenzin experienced afflictive emotions (tib. *nyon mongs pa*) such as fear, disgust, and compassion. In his view, the spirits manifested due to his compassion and tried to distract him from his practice by causing the stomach of the burning man to explode. This event gave rise to an understanding of the emotional aspects of the self, and helped Tenzin to comprehend what had happened. This sensorial experience allowed the chopas to see himself seeing, and encouraged a process of self-reflexivity which endorsed the act of detaching his self from afflictive emotions.

This chapter looks at the ways of seeing cultivated by chod as told through the experience of my informants, myself and my film practice. We move away from the ritual economy of chod towards discourse on vision. Here, image practices, be they visualisations, painting or film making, are used to analyse how chopas learn to see, train to visualise, and how they use these skills to structure knowledge of the self. To further understand, it is necessary to deconstruct the discourses in which the chopas are embedded. Visualisation discourse is embedded in narratives centred around language, monastic education methods, practices of image creation and the embodiment of philosophical principles. With this in mind, I ask: What is the role of seeing and what ways of seeing does chod promote? What is the role of the image in chod practice? How does one learn to visualise? What is the role of language? To offer answers to these questions I engage with the literature on mimesis, skilled visions and double perspectivism. After a brief theoretical discussion, I focus on the language of visualisations in Tibetan and offer a brief introduction to the stages of visualisation in chod.

Seeing is a privileged and fundamental sense in chod practice and Tibetan Buddhist modes of knowing more generally. This emphasis on seeing is evident in the structures of Tibetan Buddhist texts, and reveals how it was historically considered a better alternative to knowing through language (McMahan, 2002). In the following, first I analyse the language of seeing to show how modes of knowing through seeing became considered superior to those of knowing through language. Next, I critically engage with the themes of skilled vision and mimesis through an analysis of modes of learning chod visualisations based on interviews with Diane, a chopa that moved to Nepal from Austria in 1997 and devoted herself to the practice ever since, and my field notes on my own experience of learning to visualise. I then turn to a discussion of the double perspectivism of vision based on Tenzin's experience. I finish the chapter by adding another layer of analysis shaped by my filmmaking practice.

## **1. Mimesis and vision**

### **1.1 Mimesis**

Buddhism teaches us that the world in front of us is illusory and what we see is not the true nature of reality. The more you walk on the path of Buddhism the more you chop down the wall of ignorance. Yet, while we only see a portion of the truth, the rules of this reality are very much real and affect us. We cannot jump off a building thinking that gravity is an illusion. With this in mind, we need to use the rules of this world to subvert it and obtain a state of emptiness. We make sense of this world via the senses, and we engage heavily with our visual apparatus. In Vajrayana, we use the visual (i.e., visualisations) to subvert the ignorance of the



visible dimension of the world we engage in on a day-to-day basis. We use the image to free ourselves from the reality of what we see, and we create with our ignorant mind. We use acts of seeing to purify all that surrounds us in the mind. In Vajrayana all is pure; we need to learn to see it that way until pureness becomes our primary state of mind. (Khenpo Yeshe)

In the above statement Yeshe expresses his views on the Vajrayana emphasis on visualisations and images to reach a state of emptiness (tib. stong pa nyid). The orthodoxy of the Vajrayana school describes the reality that we perceive through the senses, emphasising how normal sight is illusory and a creation of our ignorant mind (tib. ma rig pa) (G. K. Gyatso, 1995; Tsongkhapa, 2005). This argument is also put forward by McMahan (2002, p. 5) who states that 'visual and spatial symbolism provided a way for Buddhists to conceive of non-conceptual awareness that is free from the fabrications of the linguistically constituted world. While language obscured reality, vision, both in the sense of direct perception and in a metaphorical sense, was understood, under certain conditions, to provide an unmediated view of reality.' To reach a state of emptiness one must cut through illusory reality by subverting the rules that govern this perceived reality. I propose that in the Vajrayana tradition, and in chod practice more specifically, this is achieved through guiding the practitioner on a path of emptiness developed through the mimetic faculty.

Mimesis has its roots in literary theory and was used by Aristotle to portray Greek tragedy as an imitation of reality, as a representation of nature in its essence (Cox, 2003, p. 106). Aristotle considers that mimesis is not only an act of imitation, but also a mode of organisation in art

and an act of creation. Taussig, in *Mimesis and Alterity*, refers to mimesis as ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become other’ (1993, p. xiii). As the anthropologist Jennifer Deger has written, one of the main contributions Taussig brings to the discussion on mimesis is the emphasis on alterity: ‘likeness needs difference to push against and re-coil from; the self becomes through the encounter with another; difference arises via the production of the similar’ (2006, p. 86). In Taussig’s view, the production of the copy pushes one to become as close as possible to resemble the original while keeping the distance between the two intact. Taussig relates the creation of difference as the intrinsic failure to create likeness in the production of the copy. The space of difference between the copy and the original is seen by Deger (*ibid*, p. 87) as a mode of knowledge production and as a modality of shifting identities. Applying this to Vajrayana practices, one may argue that the identity and knowledge of practice for the practitioner lies in the dwelling space between the original (i.e., the ‘perfection’ of the teacher, the ‘perfect’ qualities of a deity, or the experience of emptiness) and his or her practice.

Cox, in his study of the Zen arts in Japan, talks about mimesis not simply as a theory but as a faculty which is ‘like the body, part of the human condition’ (2003, p. 107). In his view, the mimetic faculty is simultaneously ‘the representation of aesthetic qualities and a representation, a creation that is embodied experience’ (*ibid*). Mimesis promotes an organisation of the senses where two ways of seeing the world are at play: ‘one is based on cognition and representation, the other on practise and experience’ (*ibid*, p. 109). In the case of the Zen arts, this mimetic faculty makes it possible for the practitioner to fashion their body

into particular forms of movement and enhance their perception of the world through the senses, both aspects forming part of the process of embodiment (ibid, p. 110). Gebauer and Wulff (in Cox, 2003, p. 110) argue that 'mimesis makes it possible for the individuals to step out of themselves, to draw the outer world into their inner world and to lend expression to their interiority through that outer world of form'. This idea is central to the practice of chod visualisations. Thus, I suggest that it is through mimesis that practitioners are able to embody the otherworld of an image (i.e., thangka paintings) during chod visualisations. Further, the image is mimetically copied in the 'inner world' of the 'self', with the effect of changing the way the practitioner perceives and behaves towards the world.

In the act of learning chod, the body of the practitioner conforms to the body of the teacher, who teaches the correct posture, handling of instruments and chanting. The act of mimesis is a perpetuation of that of the teacher's lama and his embodied experience of learning from his teacher. The chopas act of copying the lama is further embodied via the creation of visualisations and interrogations of the self. The act of seeing is twofold. On the one hand, the chopas observe a form, like the correct movement of the damaru as demonstrated by their lama and copy the movement. On the other hand, the chopas observe a static image, like the thangka of a deity, and, based on their lama's instructions and the text's descriptions, create a visual field where the act of cutting takes place. The chopas learn through repetition of the practice, from anywhere between a few times per day to once a month. The bodily movements and the creation of images in the mind are complimented by chod philosophy. While the lamas encourage chopas to engage in an act of 'perfectly' copying orthodoxy, they put more emphasis on practice that follows 'the view' of chod and the practitioner's

reflections on the 'self'. Later in this chapter, I will critically engage with how chopas use their mimetic faculties to learn chod.

## **1.2 Skilled Vision**

Mimesis generates an organisation of the senses that aids the chopas in the process of imitation. In her theory of affect, Gibbs (2010, p. 196) underlines that mimesis through the process of 'translation via different sensory modalities is what initially enables experience to be ordered into familiar patterns'. In Gibbs' view, one of the ways infants engage in the process of knowledge construction is through sensory reorganisation as an act of differentiation between the actions of their parents and their own. The internalisation of 'a self' and the recognition of the other takes place in the process of reorganising the senses in response to an action. Moreover, Gibbs shows us that the sensory organisation endorsed by the mimetic faculty promotes a type of specialised learning for each of the sensory modalities. With this in mind, I ask: What types of specialised learning and sensory organisation are developed by the mimetic faculty during the process of learning chod?

The act of visualisation is significantly different from the other elements of chod and poses several methodological challenges. While learning to chant and play chod instruments it is important to observe others. This enables one to attune practice. Yet, because they are in the mind of the practitioner, visualisations are only accessible to those who visualise. The act of visualising occurs via enskillment through established methods of teaching in the Vajrayana tradition. Enskillment (Gieser, 2008; Ingold, 2000), is a manner of attuning one's perception

and actions to a set of specialized modes of being. In the case of chod, enskilment comprises a combination of observation, mimesis, introspection, and the embodiment of orthodoxy. This process is complicated by the fact that, as I have outlined throughout the thesis, the teachings of chod vary. Differences can be reflected in the instruments used, such as the bell, the damaru or the kangling, which in turn vary in sound and tonality depending on the craftsmen who made them. The pictures of the deities one may use in visualisations also vary according to the art movement their creators belong to as well as the materials, talent and amount of money painters were offered to paint the thangka. Regardless of all these differences, the purpose of chod remains the same: to cut attachments from the self and to aid one to reach a state of emptiness. This raises the question of how the practitioner can practically engage in a process of enskilment that has its roots in mimesis. How can the contingencies and exigencies of practice be reconciled with a process of such exact and exacting reproduction? On one level, it is through mimesis that one learns the basics of chod, such as chanting, playing the musical instruments, and the order of the ritual. On another level, mimesis produces an emotion, via a specific emotional elicitation method, where the words of chod are translated into emotional responses induced via the rhythms, melodies, and sounds specific to each part of the chod text.

Eck (1998) emphasises that seeing and being seen by a deity is at the heart of Hindu worship. The concept of darsana, translated from Sanskrit as 'seeing', denotes a mode of skilled visions that deity worshipers acquire through practice. Eck writes, 'when Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say 'I am going to worship', but rather 'I am going for darshan'. They go to see the image of the deity' (Eck, 1998, p. 3). The act of seeing in this context does not only

refer to the worshipper seeing the deity, but also the deity seeing the worshipper. Darsana also implies contact, or 'touching with the eyes', between the image and the practitioners, where darsana 'involves a process of divine contiguity between the seer and seen in which the benefits of the viewing event would be the outcome of the physical visual 'contact' with an image' (Pinney, 1997, p. 106). In Eck's view (1998, p. 10), darsana is a concept that permeates all aspects of Hindu life in the same way as the divine is always present and visible in all aspects of human life. The concept of darsana is also present in the Tibetan language and translates as tong. It occurs in the concept of tong lam (tib. mthong lam), meaning the 'path of seeing' – one of the five paths of liberation from samsara (Gethin, 1998). Learning darsana, in this case, refers to a double directionality of sight, where the practitioner learns to see the deity and at the same time learns to 'be seen by the deity'.

In her work with cattle breeders in Italy, Grasseni argues that skilled visions are 'not a disembodied 'overview' from nowhere, but a capacity to look in a certain way as a result of training' (2004, p. 41). The skilled visions employed by the chopas in the process of visualisation are the result of their training to see in a specific way. The aim of developing skilled visions, as detailed by Grasseni (2007, p. 6), is to 'orient perception and structure understanding, in other words, they not only convey ideas, meanings and beliefs, but also configure them'. The skilled visions developed by the chopas during the visualisation processes are tools for a transformation of the self. The act of seeing, defined by Eck (1998, p. 14), is 'an imaginative, constructed activity, and the act of making. It is not simply the reception of images on the retina.' Thus, one may argue that learning to see through chod is a constructed skill and that the experience of reaching skilled vision is unique to each chopas.

Skilled visions in this sense do not only refer to the internal process of reshaping the self but also to the external ritual aspects of chod, such as in the case of learning to see the text and learning to visualise. As we saw in the opening vignette, for Tenzin, 'skilled vision' meant being able to see and memorise the environment in order to distinguish it from spiritual manifestations that appear at night, and to recognize obstacles and spiritual manifestations on the journey to the cremation ground and beyond. In my case, I developed skilled vision through three different channels: the training I received from Yeshe, the experiences I shared with my fellow chopas during chod or talking about it, and via the camera in the process of making a film.

### **1.3 Double vision**

In the opening vignette, we saw that chopas Tenzin aims to tame the spirits of the cremation ground, while at the same time the spirits try to distract and 'tame' his intentions. Similarly, in thinking about the way one sees the deity and the deity looks back – as we observed in the context of darshan – Tenzin is hunting for the spirits while being hunted at the same time. This double perspective can be compared to the double perspectivism of the Yukaghir hunters of Siberia described by Willerselv (2009), where the hunters hunt in an interstitial space as part human and part elk. My argument takes this further, for Tenzin can identify the emotions he needs to cut out by distancing himself from a comfortable space (i.e., home) where these emotions may not manifest, as well as distancing from his sense of vision. This translates into the act of seeing the self at a distance. To me, this is akin to Merleau-Ponty's views that 'to see is to have at a distance' and that the invisible can only be accessed via the

defamiliarization of experience (1968, p. 136) – two points which accord with the Yukaghiri hunters' behaviour of engaging in a process of deep self-reflexivity during the act of seeing. Before being able to address the self, the chopra has to become aware of the attachments they have to the self. The self in its entirety is made visible to the chopra through their actions and interactions, and is also informed by their karma (Col, 2007). Tibetan cosmology implies that 'events, and not only things and beings, are and create points of view' (Col, 2007, p. 230). In other words, one needs to become aware of the actions of the self during or after the unfolding of causes and conditions from a distance, to be able to embody the understanding that such events give rise to in one's mind.

Distance is a key issue here. Willerslev (2009) draws on Merleau-Ponty (1968) to argue that distance and proximity reflect each other and that the sense of distance is a precondition to seeing. When hunting, the Yukaghiri of Siberia rely on distance to mimic the behaviour, smell, movement, sounds and appearance of the elks to fool their prey by demonstrating that they are no different to them. Hunters seek to convince the elk that they look in a mirror and see themselves when they gaze at the hunters. Hunters use this 'illusion' to encourage the elk out of its hiding spot and not associate the hunter with danger. The distance between the hunter and the elk allows for a deep sense of reflexivity that arises from the act of seeing and being, and Willerslev argues that this type of mirror vision allows the hunter to see himself seeing. On the other hand, the elk falls prey to his own image and gives himself to the hunter, removing in this way the self-reflexivity from vision. For Willerslev (2009), the sense of distance in the act of seeing allows the hunter to keep his sense of self intact and to not become an animal. In the case of chod, more work is needed to fully grasp the impact of the



mirror vision of the self, and the effects distance has on the development of the sense of self. For the chod practitioner, seeing from a distance allows for the dissolution of the self by highlighting the emotions that the chopas needs to dissociate from, and reinforces the ones that the chopas wants to associate with. This is similar to the ways in which the hunters are able to see two types of selves, and how, with the use of the distance and reflexivity that comes with mirrored vision, they choose to reinforce the human self as opposed to the animal manifestation.

## **2. The language of seeing**

### **2.1 The conceptualisation of seeing in language**

In this section, I engage with the language of seeing in Tibetan Buddhism to highlight the primacy of vision. I give an account of the Tibetan words used to describe visualisations as well as the stages of seeing in chod, and describe how seeing organises knowledge through the notion of evidentiality in the Tibetan language. As stated above, seeing is one of the five paths used in Tibetan Buddhism to reach a state of emptiness (Gethin, 1998). The primacy of seeing translates into the incorporation of ‘visual elements’ alongside linguistical foundations in Vajrayana practices. In chod, images, sounds and visualisations are an essential part of the chopas tool kit to obtain a state of emptiness. However, the use of language and images is most visible on the beginner’s path. McMahan (2002, p. 4) recognizes the authority of the ‘visual’ over language in early Buddhism: ‘according to virtually all schools of South Asian Buddhism, language constructs a false sense of oneself and the things of the world and erects a labyrinth of artificial meanings, within which consciousness becomes imprisoned, binding

one to the repetitious cycle of birth and rebirth'. As McMahan argues, historically Buddhist thought considered that language alone was not sufficient to turn one away from grasping-at the subject object dualism (tib. *gzung 'dzin*) or to help one reach a state of emptiness. During my fieldwork, Khenpo Pema suggested that both language and vision are an impediment to emptiness and may only help one to reach a certain stage in chod practice. In my case, I was introduced to the practice via language and the senses, especially vision and hearing. According to my teacher, I was not able to reach an advanced stage – to move towards a non-conceptual type of chod. As far as I was aware none of my informants were able to either. Based on the understanding that the training of the senses and language can only help the practitioner to achieve a certain stage of chod, one may argue that the senses and language are set in a hierarchy and are used to refer to the level of practice of the practitioner.

According to my Tibetan language teacher, Buddhist philosophy and the Tibetan language reflect one another. Often Buddhist principles are mirrored in language and they become part of everyday Tibetan life. One cited example is the principle of causal condition in the construction of the future tense. In Tibetan, 'the future tense' cannot be formed by the use of verbs that indicate uncontrolled action. For example, 'the future of to be sick' does not exist due to the belief that one cannot control the outcome of an action that is conditioned by factors outside one's control (i.e., the factors that might make one sick). Thus, the phrase 'I will be sick' is not common in Tibetan. In a similar vein, the tension between language and vision, that is between the capacity of language to convey the 'truth' of the world through sight and images, is also evident in language structures. One example is the formation of inference and evidentiality in expressing day-to-day activities in colloquial Tibetan. McMahan

(2002, p. 46), in his elaboration of the language-(visual) perception tension in the Mahayana tradition, argues that: 'perception (skt. *pratyaksa*) in and of itself, free from any conceptual appropriation, is closer to the unmediated truth of things than verbalized sentences, particularly propositional subject/predicate statements; and second, language, concept, classification, and reflection are presumed to distort the true apprehension of things and can conceal more than they reveal'. While this tension is recognised in the Buddhist doctrine as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that this principle translated into grammatical and linguistic structures, highlighted in the construction of evidence in the present/past tense (Hill & Gawne 2017).

In practical terms, evidentiality seeks to offer a response to the question "how do you know?", a question often emphasised by my Tibetan language teacher. In the colloquial Tibetan language of the DCT (Diasporic Common Tibetan) spoken in Boudhanath, evidentiality and degrees of certainty of evidentiality are based on direct perception, with an emphasis on visual perception (Caplow, 2017). Evidentiality seeks to offer a response to the question "how do you know?" – a question often emphasised by my Tibetan language teacher. For example, if I say "Tenzin is at the restaurant", I would use a grammatical structure based on *duk*, which implies that this is a certain fact because I saw it myself. If I say the same phrase based on what a friend had told me, I would use a grammar structure based on *yo* or *yo re*, which implies that the information is not based on direct perception and it may not be certain. Grammatical structures based on *duk*, or its past *son*, are also used to describe inferences based on personal experience. The use of *duk* and *son* demonstrate the importance of vision in Tibetan modes of being in the world, so much so that it is reflected in language structures.

The language structures of evidentiality may also aid in understanding how one obtains the knowledge articulated and to what extent the interlocutor should believe or question this knowledge. The act of (visual) witnessing an action and then verbalising it provides certainty in this context.

The use of duk is not solely reserved to visualisation and it may be used to refer to knowledge gathered via other senses, like hearing or touching (Caplow, 2017). In interviews with my informants, duk and son were often used in conversations about visualisations. In the Tibetan language overall, one can only speak about personal experience. My Tibetan informants would only use duk or son to relate to their own experience of visualisations, whereas if they were to talk about another person's experiences of visualisations, they would use yo or yo re. The terminology for visualisation may change depending on the context, and the most common term used together with duk or son is dmigs pa (migpa) and at times gsal 'debs pa. In the text *Treasury of blessings, A Practice of Buddha Śākyamuni* by Mipham Rinpoche (2010), Dmigs pa is often used and translates as 'to visualise', but it can also be used to refer to the object of observation, the object of awareness, mental image, or imagination. The phrase gsal 'debs pa can be used with the meaning of to visualise, imagine, visualise clearly, bring to mind, elucidate, illuminate, shine, or make clear. Another term used for visualisation in the Dharma protectors practice is dmigs gnad, which is translated as the key point of visualisation, radiation, or points of concentration.

Wierzbicka (in Parkin, 2015, p. 7) argues that keywords are ‘focal points around which entire cultural domains have been organized’. Keywords are not simply ‘language shadows ... but packed-in semantic ramifications that can be traced out to underlying cultural presuppositions’ (Parkin, 2015, p. 7). In discussions about the stages of visualisation, my informants used the term *dmigs rim* (stage of visualisation). In the context of deity visualisations, the keywords they used were *lha’l gsal snang* (clear appearance, visualisation of a deity, or the deities’ vivid presence) or *rten bskyed lha bskyed* (visualisation of the generated support). Additional key terms were *sgom bzlas* (visualisation and mantra recitation) and *bdag bskyed* (self-generation). The keywords used to talk about visualisations underline the variety and richness of words available in Tibetan to express the action of visualising, as well as to delimit different stages of the visualisation process. The variety of terms for visualisation sits alongside topics such as consciousness and mind, which total over 60 words, highlighting the importance of visualisation processes in Vajrayana practices.

### **3. Stages of visualisations**

The diverse visualisation terminology originates in the classical Tibetan language and can be found in the tantric texts. According to Khenpo Pema, *chod* follows the system of the development stage (tib. *bskyed rim*) and completion stage (tib. *rdzogs rim*) of visualisations. The detailed orthodoxy of practices based on development and completion stages is described in *Vajra Wisdom, Deity Practice in Tibetan Buddhism* (Nyima & Gyaltsep, 2012). The book, a manual for deity visualisation-based practices, was at the heart of the teachings I received from Yeshe, before engaging in *chod* practice. According to Khenpo Pema, the development stage of *chod* is made up of the following elements: the action of taking refuge,

the generation of bodhicitta (compassion), the invitation of enlightened beings to take part in the practice, extraction of blessings, deity embodiment and the attainment of great bliss. This stage sits alongside a series of practices in Vajrayana, like pure land visualisations, where language, such as the sadhana, fulfils the purpose of guiding the chopa into constructing a 'perfect', un-mediated world, where knowledge becomes visible through practices of visualisation. The visualised world becomes the locus where the action and core practice of the chod ritual takes place. The visual knowledge developed during this stage can be seen as an epistemological tool (McMahan, 2002, p. 5) that allows one to nurture the path of emptiness. In Troma Nagmo's chod, the creation of the mandala of the deity is the starting point for the visualisation of the unmediated place of action. The mandala creation stage follows a series of preliminary prayers, supplications, guru yoga, and a refuge and motivation stage, which may also include visualisations. The chod text offers a detailed description of the appearance, ornaments, and the whole retinue of deities that form the mandala of Troma Nagmo (Fig. 3.3). This stage is followed by an invitation for the deity to reside in the mandala.



Fig. 3.3

In Pema's view, the completion stage involves a state of meditation on the values and wisdom of the deity and its pantheon, as well as the dissolving of all visualisations to a state of emptiness. During the dissolution stage, performed after the body offering visualisations, the chopas stop chanting and playing instruments and meditates on the wisdom and knowledge gained from the practice. This part of chod is usually conducted in complete silence. The text requires the chopas to mentally 'dissolve' (tib. thim pa) the mandala of the deity, the body offerings, and all other visualisations, sounds, or movements into emptiness. During this stage, the chopas transcend the conceptual framework and rest the mind in emptiness. The completion stage is an example of the language–vision tension described before, where language is not sufficient yet necessary to help direct the chopas towards a state of emptiness. The image of the mandala of the deity pictured above (Fig. 3.1) is the one that students have to perfectly visualise during Troma chod. The mimetic exercise of creating a mental image is a 'powerful constituent in the construction of knowledge and establishing of practice' (Rotman, 2009, p. 173). But how exactly do chopas visualise such an image? In practice, the act of copying the physical image of the deity as a mental image is often challenging and subject to the practitioner's skills. A complex mental effort is needed to hold the mandala in the mind's eye (tib. blo mig) for the required duration. In the next section, I focus on how chopas learn to visualise.

## **4. Learning to see in practice**

### **4.1 Mimesis and form**

The act of visualising was one of the first things Yeshe taught me before I was initiated on the path of chod. The teachings were basic: "take an image of the Buddha and look at it for a long



time, 10-20-30 minutes, and start reproducing the picture in your mind, go over it bit by bit, start with the Buddha's face and move on to the other parts of the image" (Yeshe). The practice was challenging, and I was not able to hold many of the details stable in my mind. A few days later, I met Yeshe and expressed my disappointment at failing this task. He then told me: "To visualise the whole image is very complicated. You first have to look at the image. Then think about a visualisation like a painting or sculpting. When a painter draws something, he does not start with the details, when a sculptor makes a statue, he does not sculpt the eyes first, they both start by making a form, a shape. In the same way, you should start by visualising the shape of the main object of visualisation. If we look at this painting, you should start by visualising the form of Guru Rinpoche. After the painter has painted the main shape, he then adds details, in the same way as a sculptor would start adding details. After you have some sort of stability with the shape that you generate, for a minute or two, you can then start adding details, like the eyes."

In Cox's examination of the Zen arts in Japan (2003, p. 114), learning through mimesis starts with the observation of form that is invariably in motion, as the student follows the bodily movements of the teacher. Here learning is defined as 'learning through watching'. In the Tibetan Buddhist context, learning starts with the intention of seeing the deity, followed by the observation of the static form of the deity, and then a reproduction of the form in the mind. Matthews (2007, p. 992), in a study on memory and images, argues that people generally remember moving images better than static images, and both imply the use of a different cognitive network, indexed not only spatially but spatiotemporally. Another important aspect of Matthews' research is that people remember faces better – both static

and moving – than non-facial images. In learning to visualise in chod, practitioners train to see static pictures through staring and moving pictures through glancing, as I explain below.

The first static form Yeshe asked me to visualise was the face of the Buddha. The act of gazing at faces is embedded in a long tradition of looking at static images and temples in Boudhanath. The gaze 'structures a relationship between viewers and the image, or focal object, and are therefore modes of interface with the broader network in which any gaze is embedded' (Morgan, 2014, p. 94). From my observations at the temples, and contemplation of Buddhist art more generally in Boudhanath, I realised that the practitioners' gaze is guided to the 'centre' of the images they gaze upon. For example, when one enters Ka-Nying Shedrub, the first place one looks is towards the statues of the Buddha or Guru Rinpoche located in the centre of the monastery. It is customary for practitioners to supplicate to these three times upon entering, thus reinforcing the act of gazing upon the statues. A similar configuration exists in all the monasteries in the Boudhanath area, including the Mother's chod centre, where thangkas direct the practitioner's gaze to the centre of the image similar to the way sculptures are arranged in temples. The main figure of the thangka, be it the Buddha or Troma, is usually placed at the centre of the painting, on the central axis, symmetrical to the lateral sides. Buddhas are often placed higher up in the images, while other deities are generally depicted lower down and lineages are painted along the top.



Fig. 3.4

Fig. 3.5

Fig. 3.6

The above paintings, Troma (Fig. 3.4), Buddha Shakyamuni (Fig. 3.5), and Green Tara (Fig. 3.6) all commissioned at Yeshe's request, show the centrality and proportions of the main deity in the painting. The position of the deity in the paintings guides the position of the practitioner in the visualisations. The position of the Buddha in visualisations was central to the direction of my eyes, mirroring my body proportions. For example, in my visualisations, I sat mirroring the body position of the Buddha, whose face was situated in front of my face, at a distance of around 70cm. Here it becomes clear that the act of copying the representation of the Buddha involves a mode of contact between the body of the practitioner and the body in the image. Contact, following Taussig, is described by Cox (2003, p. 112) as a sensuous quality 'meaning to be in touch with, and appreciative of, the body's tactility'. The intersection between the act of copying the representation and the sensuous act of contact is what creates the embodied knowledge of the static image in this case.

Taussig, following Frazer, describes mimesis in terms of the power of the copy, where copying has 'magical' powers to the extent that it affects the original 'to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented' (Taussig in Cox 2003, p. 112). The assumption here is that each 'good' copy of a thangka is representative of the deity itself. The act of copying the form of the deity in the context of visualisations is similar to the way Chime, my thangka teacher, drew a thangka of Troma. After making and preparing the canvas from a stretched cotton cloth covered in clay and chalk powder, Chime drew the proportions and sketched the form of the deities before adding details, as seen in Fig. 3.7. Chime himself mimetically copied the form from an image that Yeshe had given me with the 'correct form' of the deity's image. After he drew the geometrical lines to help him position the deities, he then drew the form of Troma and then moved to the other deities.



Fig. 3.7

The act of copying the image of the Buddha also forced my body into adopting the form of the Buddha's body, which sits cross-legged in the 'lotus position', with a straight back. This position was adopted by all chod practitioners I observed during practice and is also a popular sitting position used on a day-to-day basis. The concept of 'contact' becomes relevant here as well, in the form of mimicking bodies during practice. In the case of group practices, practitioners adopted similar body positions, creating in this way a "body energy" – a sense of togetherness and a mode of knowing through the body. Diane describes the tactility of the act of copying and contact: "during group practices, some lamas can 'touch' you when they visualise". The act of sensuous contact and the power of the visual 'copy' as described by Diane follows Benjamin's (1973) concept of the 'tactility of vision'.

As thangka painters copy the form of a deity, their gaze, or mode of seeing, creates a relationship with the image in front of them. The deity is seen and sees, creating at the same time a reverse correlation between the environment where the act of seeing develops and the image itself. This act is described by Morgan (2014, p. 96) as a mode of producing 'presence'. In Belting's (2016) words, (symbolic) 'presence' is described as a relationship between the 'tangible' image and the 'imaginary' image. According to Yeshe's instructions, the act of adding details to the visualisations follows the pattern of the thangka painter. Once the form was ready, Chime drew the details (Fig. 3.8), then added colours, and afterwards adjustments were made. After the colours were finished, Chime applied gold to parts of the drawing. The most important part of the process is the opening of the eyes of the deity and their entourage. This reinforces the emphasis on the importance of sight in Buddhism, and this last step is usually performed on an auspicious day. The act of painting the deity on a

canvas is an act of making the deity visible or 'tangible'. The deities themselves are by no means 'absent' or 'non-existent' otherwise, but, according to Belting, they require a physical presence to become visible (ibid). Through visualisation, one may argue that this act of 'presence' is furthered embodied via 'contact', as the deity is visualised and thus transformed from a static representation to a moving body. In the following section we turn our attention from static to moving images in the visualisation process.



Fig. 3.8

## 4.2 Developing skilled vision

During my interviews with Diane, we discussed the way she learnt chod and the techniques the monks taught her to aid with visualisations of moving images. Diane learnt several of the preliminary practices that the chopas use for support. One such practice is pho ba, which is the first stage in the visualisation of the body offering. Pho ba is the practice of ejecting consciousness out of the body and transforming it into a light source, or in this case a deity, and leaving the body at will. It is usually practised in preparation for dying, as a mode of transferring consciousness at the time of death. Diane performs a simple version: "I imagine the central channel and I shoot out a ball of energy, my consciousness, through the crown chakra, and then it manifests into the form of a deity, like Troma. You are in a light form, you are not meant to be solid, you are not visualising yourself in a solid form, but more of a hologram, like a light, rainbow-like form of light." Griva however, as a beginner, usually visualises herself as a deity in a solid form. Here we see how the visualisations used in chod are dependent upon each practitioner's experience and trajectory as a Buddhist. That Diane sees visualisation as a rainbow/hologram may reflect her long experience on the path of Buddhism, while Griva told me that she was new to Buddhism (before she practiced Hinduism) and she had not trained in the preliminary practice required for chod. Eck (1998) argues that seeing is active rather than a passive act. In the case of the chopas, we can observe how they adapt their previous knowledge and experience of a variety of Buddhist practices to their visualisation practice. The path of learning chod usually comes later in life, like in Diane's case, when practitioners learn adjacent tantric practices that aid them during chod. The act of repetition, like diverse tantric visualisations (i.e., deity yoga), trains the mind to be flexible and adapt to different circumstances, as Diane tells us:

*“usually, as people enter chod practice a little later in their tantric practice path... they should already be able to do these things (visualisations), and they don’t need to learn it again. Once you have learnt it with one practice it is so easy to apply it to all other deity practices, to visualise and transform your body big or small. Your mind becomes flexible and easily adaptable, and when you come to chod practices later in your path... you don’t need to go there again and train because you already have the training.”*

Diane’s training for visualising a deity was similar to mine:

*“the tradition will give you a picture and you would take some pre-steps – maybe at home, not during the group practice – where you look at the deity for 2.5 minutes and focus on different features, then you close your eyes and try to see it in front of you, then you open them again and look... you do it like that, in this case, it is a self-visualisation, so then you need to put that on the self, you think about all the ornaments, the bones, the body posture, and then when you visualise yourself you will not think about having organs – when you are a deity it is more like the outer light cover of emptiness. You are Krodikali, and then you see your body left there because*



*you shot your consciousness and mind out, so only the skin/husk of the body is out there, and now you are in the new body of the deity.”*

In Diane’s practice, the next step in the body offering visualisation is the performance of the body cutting and offering:

*“Then I cut off my skull, I make a skull cup, and then I transform it to be as big as the universe going over the world. My friend showed me a video, I think it is called Andromeda, something about a galaxy, and it was so helpful, it was so far away from earth and if you zoom inside that you can see how many stars there are and it is so vast, so huge, so it helps me in my visualisation to think about that, space is endless, but I try to visualise it as big as I can. The whole other world becomes... you know if I were to practice here, I won’t see the cappuccino or so but also my deity body can change in size as I want. In some steps on how to practice visualisation, I had a class on it... it is a long topic like they (lamas) are so pedagogical, they show you little steps on how to train in visualisation. There is one point where you see yourself as a deity and visualise... you become as small as a thumbnail, then you become as big as the universe, then you see yourself in all directions, it trains the flexibility of the mind, the visualisation is a big part of the training.”*

In the above statements, we can observe how Diane embodies the knowledge transmitted by the lamas and makes sense of it through her own experience by making use of day-to-day

practices. As opposed to the training for visualising static images, we can observe additional elements that aid Diane in training the ‘flexibility’ of the mind for moving visualisations, such as visualising the deity in different sizes. The process of creating motion here is based on animating the initial image of the deity by making it bigger or smaller. The act of visualising images in motion may be associated with the act of editing or putting images together in the process of filmmaking, as I discuss elsewhere. Diane’s development of skilled visions structures her understanding of the self as well as chod. What mechanisms of seeing does the chopas use in addressing the ‘illusory’ self? With each practice of chod, the self is questioned, and via emotional elicitation and double vision, the chopas can address parts of the self that may be considered problematic. In the next section, I discuss how Tenzin uses double vision to address the self.

### **4.3 Double Vision**

Returning to the introductory vignette, where we followed Tenzin in one of his cremation ground practices, we saw how he makes sense of events through his skilled vision. On top of this, we witnessed a deep process of self-reflexivity that is created at the intersection of the environment and Tenzin’s experience of chod. The space of the cremation ground, in Tenzin’s case, is a place where the chopas exposes himself to emotions that may not manifest in the comfort of his home, such as fear. In this way, Tenzin makes parts of his self visible through interacting with a space charged with ‘negative’ energies. The spirit that appeared in front of Tenzin caused emotions such as compassion and fear to manifest inside him, and he developed of a mode of knowing through the ‘contact’ of seeing. This act of seeing the self at

a distance engendered a double perspective where the chopa was able to see both the events unfolding in front of him and his self dwelling in fear and attachments. In the knowledge that the events were illusory, Tenzin looked towards the inside at his attachments, and he became aware of the emotions he needed to cut. Rather than seeing the spirit as a manifestation to be scared of and act against in order not to be harmed, Tenzin took the road of compassion and saw himself in the spirit, thus causing him to act upon the spiritual manifestation of his mirrored self with empathy and kindness. Seeing at a distance, in this case, translates into seeing the self reflected back in the image of the visualisation. Through the stimulus of language, sounds, vision and the environment, the chopa gave rise to afflicted emotions, which later became the focus of the cutting. For example, in the opening vignette, we learn about the sounds of skeletons and the spirits manifested in front of Tenzin. By embodying the image and qualities of Krodikali, Tenzin was able to compare the qualities he strives for (those that are associated with the deity) with those that he possessed. When he sensed the spirits in front of him, Tenzin became aware that fear was one of the emotions he wished to address. Further, instead of seeing the manifestation of the spirit as something exterior to himself, he saw it as a manifestation of his own mind, and thus decided that he had the power to address it and cut the emotion, allowing it 'to exit' the self. During visualisations, a dissociation between consciousness and the body arises, creating further distance and allowing for a deeper sense of reflexivity. By embodying the deity and seeing oneself from a distance, the elements that require cutting become more obvious. This form of seeing is not limited to chod ritual practice and is also adopted in the practitioner's day-to-day activities. In this way, chod becomes a daily practice of taking distance and cutting emotional attachments.

In the case of both Diane and Tenzin, the outcomes of chod are used to identify the emotional attachments that arise in their day-to-day activities. When I asked about how she applies the cutting of the self in day-to-day activities, Diane related: "I am catching myself. When I am in a situation that's totally selfish, I cut it right there, I stop right there... for example, when I am holding something like... being generous to a beggar". For Diane, seeing a beggar asking for money gives rise to compassion and at the same time it allows her to address the stirrings of selfish intention which could lead to the act of not giving. The sense of reflexivity that arises during this act allows Diane to cut the selfish act and instead perform the action of giving. Cutting the attachments to the self allows one to see oneself at a distance.

## **5. Learning to see with the camera - filming the act of visualisation.**

I engaged in the act of representing the visualisations of chod through a collaborative approach with Yeshe. As per Yeshe's instructions, the act of learning to visualise starts with the form of the deity, followed by the face and the rest of the body parts. I found it relevant to use the images my informants created, especially the thangkas. I based my approach on the ways I learnt to visualise with my eyes closed. During the visualisations, I imagine a copy of the form of the Buddha on a dark background. The image appeared and disappeared depending on my concentration. At times I would add details to this form, such as the eyes, other times I would focus on other aspects inspired by the thangka. I decided to use the same approach in my film and alternate between parts of the deity's body and a black screen. The scene starts with images of thangkas as used by my informants during their chod group practice. These images are usually a printed copy of the thangkas, and they are placed behind

the chod sadhana, in front of the chopa. I filmed these images from the perspective of the chopa, at the eye level sitting crossed legged on the floor. Further, I used the thangka images made by Chime to highlight the building of the visualisation process. I start with the contour of the deity figure on the canvas then move to the images being filled with colour, to the image where the thangka is fully completed with all the details. This scene in the film is supported by a narrative from Diane on how she learnt to visualise step by step. Diane's narrative, combined with a soundtrack composed of chod chants and images of thangkas that appear and disappear on a black screen, allows the audience to experience visualisations from a mind's eye perspective.

Throughout the practice of learning to see with the camera, I enhanced my skilled visions through the images I worked with. During visualisations, I mainly focused on the form of the deity and the facial features, and while filming, I paid close attention to the details of the paintings, such as textures, ornaments, or colours. The act of learning with the camera in this case aided me in creating more stable and detailed visualisations. I combined a focused approach to seeing, like the act of looking at the features of the deity's face and ornaments through the zoom lenses of my camera, to mimetically copying these images in my visualisations. Yet, the images made by my camera were by no means stable, and they often appeared and disappeared or were distorted or combined with other images created by/in my mind. In the final section, I introduce montage as a means of learning to see with the camera.

## 5.1 Montage as a way of seeing with the camera

The act of 'interruptedness' that characterises visualisations, like the act of appearing and disappearing from the mind's eye, can be compared to the process of montage. In both cases, images are put together to create meaning, or to distract or direct the 'self' towards observing certain aspects of reality. According to Yeshe, it is the nature of the mind to constantly produce thoughts and images. Through montage, meaning is constructed by the juxtaposition of images and sounds, creating in this way correlations that were not previously seen by the viewer. One example here is the juxtaposition of thangka paintings and images in the Great Stupa. Taken one by one, each shot may convey a different meaning as opposed to the meaning created by their succession on the screen. At the same time, the practice of visualisation creates meaning through the succession of images unfolding in the mind of the chopa, be it the creation of the mandala of the deity or the body offering sequence.

Another consideration of 'editing' should refer to the act of 'editing' the self, as part of the chod practice. Both Tenzin and Diane aspire to cut aspects of their self that don't serve them. Can we consider this an act of 'editing' the 'bad' aspects of the self by cutting them out? If this is the case, the act of montage can be a key tool for the anthropologist who seeks to learn to see with the camera. Taussig, in an overview of Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres Fous*, refers to montage as 'a manner of interruptedness – a device for provoking a zone of imaginary possibility where any sense of stable identity is turned upside down and made strange... a kind of film choreography of alterity becoming alterity' (Taussig in Willerslev & Suhr, 2014, p. 14). How would this 'interruptedness' of the visual narrative during chod be portrayed

through montage? The answer to this is further explored in the next chapter. For now, I finish this chapter by raising one of the methodological challenges in capturing visualisations: how to make visualisations visible to the camera. I do not suggest that the film should be a simulacrum of chod, yet I do think it should come close to providing a disruptive representation of what is visible and invisible. Montage, in Suhr's view (2012), may offer the anthropologist the possibility to evoke the invisible dimension of moving towards an experience beyond representation, yet without rendering it visible: 'montage, along with the other forms of cinematic manipulation, is a precondition for evoking the invisible in its own right' (ibid, p. 284). In this context, beyond representation refers to an experience that lies at the place where the boundaries between object and subject are blurred. The need to create a film in this manner also comes from the core purpose of chod. In the beginner's stage one learns thought conceptualisation, while towards the more advanced stages one learns to unlearn and move into a non-conceptual stage, a move beyond object/subject dichotomy and beyond our capacity to represent. An experience that moves the viewer outside the familiar into a non-conceptual place that lies beyond the capacity of language to express it. O'Sullivan, in a discussion about art and it's possibility to move beyond representation states:

Art in this context can be synonymous with film, as it is through the engagement with film that in my case one can move to an experience that may not be conceptual, one that moves in the realm beyond our linguistic capacities to represent experience. Here, I consider language as a limitation to be able to define what an experience beyond representation is and I focus on some of the ways one can move into this realm of experience. Suhr proposes the method of 'disruptive montage' as a way of achieving such an effect. I suggest that any use of

montage should be fully informed by in-depth ethnographic knowledge of the particularities of chod visualisations, and all editing decisions should be taken with this in mind. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how montage works in the film to help me capture the invisible, and to create an experience beyond representation.



## Chapter 5: Ways of hearing and ways of listening in the context of chod

*Two scooters moved past the stationary line of cars down the little road by my house. The blare from their exhaust pipes combined with the honking of the cars and the groaning of the aeroplanes taking off a few miles away, creating an afternoon symphony. The emissions from their mufflers rose into the damp air and reflected the rays of the burning sun, enriching the smog. The sound of the mantra recited by the amala passed between the cars and the haze and resonated through my body. The further I walked, more mantras floated through the air, and the raucous sounds of cars and scooters dissipated and merged into the soundscape – this was a sign I was approaching the stupa. The jammed cars contrasted with the vegetable vendor’s cart seeking stillness in the traffic. His voice raised riotously above the brassy noise of the traffic, alerting people from the nearby streets of his presence. The traffic jam helped him earn a few hundred rupees as people walked by. The dog by the incense shop greeted me with a bark. Another aeroplane peeled across the sky. The sound of the steps people made while circumambulating the stupa blended well with the ‘om’ based meditative music drifting out of the incense shop. I was on my way to meet Griva. We met at the Ka-Nying Shedrub’s gates and we intended to record a few practices of chod and an interview. The Ka-Nying Shedrub’s soundscape, as well as most areas of Boudhanath, was augmented by the sound of hammers and construction tools. Builders were working on an extension of the monastery and*

*the noise they produced rendered my microphone's unidirectionality impractical. Griva suggested that we go by the stupa and continue our conversation there.*

*I met Griva at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute (RYI), where she was studying for a BA in Buddhist Studies, during my first month of fieldwork. Originally from a Hindu family, Griva discovered Buddhism via the meditation classes she took at a gompa (monastery) outside Boudhanath. From there, Griva developed an interest in Buddhism; she read a few books by the Dalai Lama and started to incorporate some of the Dharma principles in her day-to-day life. The small changes she embraced, like a more compassionate attitude to life, helped her to see some of the benefits of Buddhism and she joined RYI that summer to deepen her Buddhist knowledge. At RYI she heard chod for the first time and was mesmerized by the music: "the music aspect got me into chod. In the beginning, I was fascinated to listen and watch people perform. I love percussion instruments (i.e. damaru); this was one of the reasons I was attracted to chod". The fascination with the music led her to ask to receive empowerment from the abode of RYI to practice chod. Griva discovered chod a few months before I met her, and it quickly became her main practice. She sought teachings either in person or via YouTube and dedicated herself to practising every day in the evenings. "At the beginning, I would simply stay with the practice; I would read and stay with it. Later, I started practising just the bell, then switched to the drum, I did not do both at the same time. I practised one and then the other, and then I started to play them together. I looked into YouTube videos as well. Later a friend of mine taught me how to visualise, taught me the rhythms, melodies and the significance of what I was learning." Her friend, also one of my informants, was a white robe monk (a yogini), dedicated to the practice of chod in charnel grounds, like Tenzin.*

*When I met her, Griva had devoted the past fifteen years to music; she taught music, played percussion instruments, and had recorded albums with different bands or created music for films. For the past four years, she focused on helping people through music, and at the time I met her she was working as a music therapist. Chod changed her views on music: “when I think about what music is... it can be anything and not just a song or a genre, music can be the sound of leaves or the sound of a person walking on the pavement. Chod made me aware of what music can be, chod became music therapy for me.” The role of music in chod changed for Griva, from being an entry into the practice to becoming a path for focusing her practice: “the music of chod definitely brings the focus together. For me it brings the focus to one thing, it unites all of my senses. This is a very special practice for me, I can bring all my focus in one thing whether it is physical, mental or through my voice.” Her visualisations go hand in hand with the music and they allow for improvisation: “the time I take to visualise and the time I play the bell and the drum signifies how long, fast or slow I take to visualise. Music plays a role in holding that ground to visualise. The melody and the rhythm come together with my visualisation. The process is led by visualisations rather than music. I am usually going with the flow. The personal practice (as opposed to the group) consists of a lot of improvisations in terms of length, nuances and speed. It might not be a huge change in the melody, but it offers a lot of space for improvisation, depending on how I feel in the moment.” The sounds of chod offered structure to Griva’s practice and induced a rhythm of what to practice, when and how: “there are different melodies for each part. With the melodies I relate to different views, for example, there are dedication, aspiration, lujin, or lineage holders’ prayers. Seeing these melodies makes me ask what significance they hold; it helps me to arouse that devotion*

*needed for each part. It is easier for me to relate to different parts of chod's text because of the melodies." For Griva, the sounds of chod go beyond being simple supports for visualisation and become mediums of expression for emotions or a state of mind: "for me, the music depicts what emotions I might feel at the time through the tone of my voice, sometimes I chant in my softer voice or my strong tone. Music is very communicative, it says a lot, even if it is just the melody, and it signifies what state of mind I am in."*

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In the above description I portray something of the complex soundscape of Boudhanath, where the practice of chod is embedded. The sonic landscape of the area is heavily influenced by the numerous religious establishments, such as monasteries or the stupa, as well as the high number of religious devotees, pilgrims or tourists that engage in a variety of sonic practices, such as chanting, mantra recitation, the movement of prayer wheels, or chatter. When approaching the stupa area, I was often caught in an immersive process of listening where I would sit for hours simply listening and meditating. Reflecting on how the experience of the place affected me, I wondered in what ways the chod practitioners and the local population were affected by the sonic landscape of the area. Furthermore, I could observe how performing circumambulations and mantra recitation around the stupa made me feel part of a community even if I often did not know anyone in the crowd. I considered a number of factors that may have contributed to this experience. In one way, the immersive qualities of the soundscape contributed towards the development of a meditative state that I cherished around the stupa. In another way, the visual qualities and the teachings I received from my lama prepared me to see the stupa as a sacred object. On top of this, the smell of incense burning in the dharma shops enhanced my meditative experience by grounding me

in a specific aroma, allowing for better concentration. The meditative state was further enriched by the tactile act of putting in motion the prayer wheels surrounding the stupa, where with one hand one would move thousands of prayers through the air. The motion of people, mostly moving clockwise around the stupa, also contributed to the feeling of belonging to a community, creating a feeling of moving together at once. Overall, one can observe that the religious experience of chod, and the local variant of Buddhism in general, is heavily reliant on a combination of senses, such as sight, hearing, or smell. In the previous chapter, we observed how sight is trained and the function it plays in the practice of chod and beyond. Tenzin's experience described in the previous chapter points towards an emphasis on vision and a non-conceptual experience of chod. Others, like Griva, engage with sound as a support for meditation and visualisations. The practice of chod engages all the senses and one's experience is not solely reduced to vision. I would like to point out that for each chopa the experience of chod may involve a different sensory modality. In this chapter, I shift the attention from seeing, images and visualisations to hearing, listening and sound production. I explore how hearing, listening and sound production interact with modes of chod practice. How does one learn to produce the sounds of chod? How are sonic atmospheres produced in the context of chod and what effects do they have on the local population? What is the relationship between sound and emotions in the context of chod practice?

As described in the introduction, historically, research on religious practices relied heavily on vision as the main sensorial modality of acquiring knowledge. Previously, we learnt how Buddhism placed a heavy emphasis on sight as one of the modes of obtaining liberation, and thus over time practitioners created practices to achieve this. In the case of chod, we can

observe how tantric practices are complex rituals that make use of all the senses, including listening and sound production to obtain the desired experiential state. My focus on sound in this chapter builds on the sensorial turn in anthropology and the field of religious studies (Hackett, 2012; Howes, 1991, 2013; Ingold & Howes, 2011; Jones, 2018; Staal, 1986). Meyer and Houtman (2012, p. 1) consider this turn a sharp change of direction from an approach that: 'privileges spirit above matter, belief above ritual, content above form, mind above body, and inward contemplation above 'mere' outward action'. With this change of direction, the field of religious studies opened its doors to a variety of new approaches, specifically with a focus on the body and bodily sensations and knowledge gained via the senses.

The attention of religious studies scholars has turned towards an exploration of aurality in the experience of religious practitioners as well as the role of sound in creating sensations, eliciting emotions, and in crafting spaces and social relations (Promey, 2014). Among anthropologists, Stoller (1984), in his study of spirit possession among the Songhay of Niger, emphasises that sound is not simply a dimension of human or non-human experience but a force or presence, which can transform a person (i.e., morally, magically or politically). Stoller's research argues for a more careful exploration of sound not just from the symbolic perspective but as a dimension of culture, embedded with agency. Here, sound is not only an exterior factor but one that is embodied and one that fashions individuals and societies in specific ways. Reflecting on the example of Buddhist practitioners and the attention they put on the body in the process of chanting or mantra recitation (i.e., body postures) Cobussen writes that: 'every musician knows that music implies embodiment; not only transcendence but also immanence and materiality' (2008, p. 433).

Weiner (2011) argues that when analysing sound, one should scrutinise its material modes of production, that is to say through a historical study, as well as a study of the broadcaster and the listener in a relationship of investing sound with meaning. A similar orientation is to be found in Hirschkind's (2001) research on cassette-sermon audition practices in Egypt, where the author concludes that broadcasting technologies can impact one's moral economy and reshape personhood. Hirschkind's Cairene informants engage with cassettes in ways that influence their perceptual habits and reinforce Islamic ethical behaviour. Hirschkind's research is pertinent for reshaping our ideas of religious experience and the factors that influence religious experience from discourse to perceptual modes of engagement when we consider the mediating role of acoustic technologies. The relationship between media and religious life has brought new questions to light about mediation and immediacy which Eisenlohr (2011), in his research on Islamic mediation in Mauritius, has focused on. Eisenlohr argues for the use of media as a procreative independent force, focussing on the 'oscillation between mediation and immediacy' (2011, p. 4).

The approaches to sound in religious and anthropological studies mentioned above invite us to consider sound on multiple levels. Here, my overall emphasis is to shift the attention of the reader from vision and image production to the practices of sound production as well as hearing practices and sonic engagements. First, I analyse how the chod texts were influenced by *rasa* theory, an aesthetic movement predominant during the development of chod, to understand the reasoning behind the specific rhythms and sounds of chod music. Second, I

pay attention to the aural practices of chod in the wider soundscape of the Boudhanath area where most of my informants reside and practice. Through the concepts of sonic atmospheres and transduction, I follow the potential of sound to create and influence communities of practice as well as to elicit emotions among Buddhist practitioners. Third, I look at the ways in which sound practices are taught to and by chopas through aural teachings. Finally, I analyse how chopas learn to listen and how sound acts as a support for visualisations.

## **1. Rasa theory**

The elicitation of emotions via music or text is part of a long tradition in Tibetan and Sanskrit poetics known as the rasa theory of aesthetics. Rasa, translated from Sanskrit as ‘taste’ or ‘savour’, was initially used in the composition of dramas as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC by Bharat Natyam, and slowly became incorporated in the writings of poetics, dance, music and later in Buddhist writings. Rasa theory seeks to use the elements of poetic writing, such as rhythm, metaphors, or sound utterances, to transmit a powerful emotion experienced by a writer to an audience and raise this experience to a contemplative level. Once the receiver of the emotion connects to this experience or mood (bhava) created by the artist, the purpose of rasa writings is to transform that emotional experience towards a pure aesthetic form or essence. Some of the emotional states often used in rasa theory are fear (skt. Bhaya), disgust (skt. Jugupsa), laughter (skt. Hasya), or wonder (skt. Vismaya). The type of emotions rasa followers seek to evoke are not simple associations with a previous similar emotional state but ‘one that is impersonal, a contemplative mood’ (Chaudhury, 1952, p. 148). The theory behind how rasa might create a ‘contemplative mood’ resembles the way chod addresses emotional states and experiences. Chaudhury (ibid) argues that rasa theory writers may be



able to create such emotional states only through a dissolution of the 'practical and egoistic side of our ego in the poetic attitude and the consequent appearance of the contemplative self'. Chod follows a similar path and seeks to help one to cut attachments to the ego through a set of contemplative practices.

According to Pari Sangye and Norby Kundrup (1986), the Tibetan translation of *rasa* is *nyamb* (mood) or *ro* (tastes or flavours). One of the first mentions of *rasa* in Tibetan dharma is the Hevajra Tantra. Sakya Pandit Kunda Gyeltshen (1182-1251), who was part of a movement to bring Indian influences to Tibet, engaged with the concept of *rasa* and focused on how to apply it to Tibetan scholarship (Gold, 2007). Kunda's most influential book, *The Gateway to Learning* (tib. *Mkhas pa 'jug pa'l sgo*), discusses at length the way poetry is meant to be written with *rasa* theory in mind and how emotions should be conveyed, as well as the types of emotions that may not fit together in poetry, such as fear and tranquillity. While most of his work is based on the way poetry should be written, Kunda also suggests that dharma and poetry may overlap, and Buddhist scholars should become accustomed to the *rasa* theory of aesthetics when writing poetry of dharma or when they debate and discuss dharma topics (Gold, 2007, p. 134). Historically, emphasis was not simply put on the wording of a text; Kunda emphasises the way poetry and dharma texts sounded, their rhythm, and the tone and sounds certain words create when chanted or pronounced (Gold, 2007, p. 133). This shift in the way Buddhist scholars were directed towards writing may have influenced the way *sadhanas* were written and higher attention has been placed on the act of creating moods (or atmospheres) in the texts. Chod, initially created as a practice in the 12<sup>th</sup> century – the period when Kunda sought to influence Tibetan scholars to use the *rasa* theory – uses poetical depictions in the *sadhana* which are further reinforced by the rhythms and melodies. The text itself is written

in the form of a song-poem and combines melody and pitch, implying that there are two rhythms at stake, one given by the recited text and another by the instruments. I suggest that the concept of *rasa* in music (*raga-rasa*), as well as poetry, is not only a manner of arranging and creating a text that elicits an emotional reaction but a mode of creating a sonic atmosphere. Cupchik's (2015, p. 57) work supports this idea by arguing that the music of chod creates 'one mood-image, or *rasa* (lit. "taste"), during each sub ritual meditation, while the written liturgy is enveloped within the broader sonic iconography and describes specific meditations in the foreground.' The emphasis on aesthetics and mood appreciation in chod practice directs me to consider that the text and music of chod was not only written for its Buddhist considerations, but it sought to create an experience with a specific aesthetic judgment.

Ethnomusicologist Jeffrey Cupchik, in his research on the sound of chod in Nepal, India, the USA and Canada, identified the role of music in chod as not a mere complement to chod text but as a 'primary text and a primary conduit for the participant's development of specific emotional states and visualisations that can lead to meditative insights' (Cupchik, 2015, p. 32). Cupchik's approach to chod music through the lenses of ethnomusicology is useful to understand its specificities, as detailed above. Yet the approach adopted by Cupchik does not seek to understand the variety of modes of experience of the musical composition by different practitioners. The focus on processes of music creation, rhythm and technique on a general level may not be sufficient for understanding the complexities of chod practice, especially since each practitioner brings his own understanding, experience and music capabilities when practicing, and indeed there is no 'standard' practice of chod. Griva, in the opening vignette, expresses how she uses the music of chod and adapts it in creative ways to

suite her specific needs. For example, at times she would prolong certain rhythms or change the speed of her practice to resonate her moods and the amount of time she requires to visualise.

## **2. Sound and emotions in the practice of chod**

In this section, I take a closer look at how the music of chod is composed and how it is performed. I further investigate the role of sound in creating an emotional state and the way it aids practitioners in their practice. Cupchik's reflections on chod push for a deconstruction of the elements of chod music to tap into the role sound has in creating, sustaining, and challenging emotional states during and after the practice. Cupchik's observation may be linked with the Tibetan understanding that books and texts are a 'sound relic' (tib. sungten – 'support of speech'), reminiscent of the words of the Buddha, and therefore text comes 'to life' by either recitation, chanting or utterings (Diemberger & Ramble, 2017, p. 9).

When comparing the music of chod to other rituals or chants around Boudhanath, several elements stand out: the difference in tonalities and tones, the incorporation of men and women in leading roles in the practice, as well as the full integration of the lay community in the performance of the ritual in the monastic setting. Among all the groups I conducted fieldwork with, most preferred to perform chod as a group in a monastic setting and to use higher-pitched voices and tones (soprano, tenor, baritones and alto) as opposed to the lower bass ranges used for chanting and other rituals (i.e., mantra recitation). The gender discrepancies and favouritism of men over women did not apply in the case of chod, and a

female voice was often preferred to the male one. Furthermore, in chod, the untens and vajra masters could be members of the lay community as opposed to the monastic one. The inclusion of the lay population in the ritual practice incorporated all members of the congregations that performed together with the monks as one, united in practice. The incorporation of the lay population in chod practice required that the musical and Buddhist philosophy training normally exclusive to monks be expanded and taught to lay people.

In contrast to other chod musical lineages, which date from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the creation of chod Throma music is relatively recent, dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The melodies of Throma chod share many similarities and they build upon the older chod traditions. The music of chod is usually composed of one melodic line while other adjacent elements or rhythms come to enhance the musical texture, usually played on instruments. Certain parts of the practice, like the mandala offering, may also be played without instruments while others, like the dissolution stage, are usually performed in silence. Chod melodies require the text to be sung either by one person, usually the unten or the vajra master, or by the whole group, either in unison or in octaves. The melodies are also composed in a way whereby each phrase of the text should be sung in one breath. In this way, the music structures the rhythm of one's breath for the whole duration of the practice. Certain sounds, like phet, may only be sung by the vajra master. The melodic texture is enhanced by instruments that produce pitched sounds, and in combination with the voice, they create a drone polyphony (Cupchik, 2015, p. 51). Each melody, in Cupchik's view, is carefully structured with a sense of direction, pitches of importance and shifting pitches. The refrains usually follow the two-line stanzas in

two phases: ‘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’ (ibid, p. 52).

A closer look at how the chod liturgies are/were created reveals that the following approaches are combined: ‘tone painting, melodic phrasing, sequences and rhythmic ostinati’ (Cupchik, 2015, p. 32). Tone painting, a method of evoking and creating images in the mind of the listener based on culturally specific symbols and musical elements, such as the melody, requires special attention in this case. This method highlights the intersensoriality of chod and it is often used to mimic specific natural sounds or rhythms of nature (Diemberger & Ramble, 2017, p. 11). One example of this method of crafting sound is found in the ejection of consciousness and separation of the body section (pho ba) of chod. Cupchik (2015, p. 51) underlines that the pho ba sequence in Machik Labdron’s version of chod is inspired by the sky burial ritual, where the body of a deceased person is given to vultures to be eaten in specific mountaintop cemeteries in Tibet. The rhythm and melody of chod imitates the movement of the vultures coming to feed on a body as follows: ‘the transcription (fig 4.1.) 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’ (ibid). The separation of the consciousness from the body is highlighted through the sound and the dramatic shift in melody and rhythm.

The question that arises here is if these specific symbols and cultural means used in creating the music of chod may still be identifiable by modern-day practitioners that may have never seen a sky burial before. Another potential aim of the sky-burial type of melodic texture creation is to craft a feeling rather than to simply imitate the sound of vultures' wings flapping towards a deceased body. Cupchik argues that the five 'confident' leaps present in the below example create a climax that is rapidly reached in the 6<sup>th</sup> syllable, and that they resemble five flapping of the wings a vulture may need to reach a body. The first line of the melody, the ejection of consciousness, is followed by a descending sequence (resembling the vultures reaching the body), creating an 'arc of determination, focused attention' (Cupchik, 2015, p. 53). The cadence that represents the vultures reaching the body is meant to induce a feeling of fear in the practitioner that is then met with the calmness of the consciousness becoming a deity or dakini. This interpretation is often found in the oral tradition of chod and it can be interpreted as an orthodoxy – indeed fear is one of the emotions that all my informants referred to either during chod or because of chod.

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

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a Voice part in the upper staff and a Damaru part in the lower staff. The Voice part begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and contains the lyrics: "Rang gi - spyi wo nas - bzung - lte wa'i bar". The Damaru part includes markings for "in" and "out" and the lyrics: "lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang". The second system continues the musical and lyrical progression with the lyrics: "dbu ma phyi dkar - nang amar - mda' snyug tsam." and "lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang lha yi mkha' 'gro ma dang".

Fig. 4.1

Cupchik (2013, p. 33), identifies the purpose of the melodies of chod as to ‘enhance the meditation process by eliciting specific emotions that aid the ritual practitioner in experiencing transformative insights into a given section of a Chod ritual’. The enhanced meditation and the purposeful emotional state created by the melodies are key elements that complement visualisations (Cupchik, 2013, p. 34). In Cupchik’s view, each section of chod is carefully written to induce an emotional state and act as an emotional arch that guides the chopas into a specific emotional state, depending on the part of the text. One example that Cupchik offers are the echoes and the eerie sounds produced by the kangling that evoke feelings of fear and insecurity and which allow the chopas to expose the self to these emotions, to later cut the attachments one may have to fear (Conner, 2016, p. 53). In this way, one can think of the music of chod as a way to elicit a meditative emotional state in the body, where the words used in the sadhana are translated into emotional images. One example offered by Griva here are how feelings of compassion towards oneself are generated while engaging with

the lujin text, and in applying compassion during the lujin visualisation and cutting attachments.

While the text of chod was written with a specific emotional journey in mind and specific types of sounds and melodies to accompany it, I would like to emphasise that each person's experience is unique. The emotional journey one embarks on through chod is heavily influenced by one's experiences as well as the environment in which one practices. In the following section, I engage with the sounds of the Boudhanath environment and the implications these have on the practice of chod. On the one hand, chod operates as part of the sound of the environment to create atmospheres, especially when it is practiced in public or monastic settings; on the other, it operates as music in a local soundscape that is part of the creation of sonic atmospheres. The emotionally charged sounds of chod further circulate in the environment where they are produced and influence people's attitudes and behaviours via transductive means. The concepts of sonic atmospheres and transduction are further detailed below.

### **3. Sounds of Boudhanath**

I could identify where I was in the Boudhanath area simply by listening to the sounds. Each street had a different sound. The street leading to Shechen Monastery was permeated with the thumping sounds of hammers modelling metal into dharma objects emanating from the craftsmen's workshops. The main road was full of the sound of bus attendants wailing the destination of the buses and the sound of car wheels rolling over the endless number of potholes. The north entrance to the stupa usually hosted cart vendors loudly advertising their



products. The atmosphere in the stupa hosted thousands of spoken mantras from morning to evening. The sounds were reminders of impermanence, and while they were often repetitive, they were constantly changing, fading or rising, sometimes creating harmonies with other sounds. Distinctive patterns of sound could be identified depending on the area of Boudhanath. In the evenings, individual sounds slowly and softly transitioned into an inaudible atmosphere., fading away into silence. After 9 pm the music of Boudhanath gradually mellowed until one could hear their sweat dropping to the ground in the summer heat. The frenzy of rhythms would pick up the next day around 4 am when monasteries would ring their gongs to announce a new day.

Buddhist related sounds are not the only ones present in the Boudhanath area, and the incorporation of those urban noises in my description above is necessary to construct a sense of place. The practitioners of chod are interlinked with the general population in a complex soundscape. The level of sound in the area is high, partially due to the density of the population. The sounds of mantras and chants are often combined with those of vehicles such as cars or scooters that roam around the area surrounding the stupa. Due to the proximity of the airport, the sounds of planes constantly augment the atmosphere from morning to evening, often becoming the predominant sound and interrupting people's conversations or activities. I frequently witnessed Rinpoches stopping their teachings to allow a plane to pass so the audience may hear them. An additional layer of sound is added by the multitudes of conversations that spark up around the stupa and in the nearby tea houses or restaurants. As well as being a sacred place, the stupa is a central meeting point and leisure area. Non-human actors, such as dogs, contribute to the Boudhanath soundscape, specifically at night. Many in

the local Buddhist community think that Buddhas, bodhisattvas or demons are also present in the area, and they all engage and benefit from the sounds cultivated in and around the stupa. In the case of Boudhanath, I argue that the concept of sonic atmospheres (Riedel, 2020) is useful for describing and analysing the soundscape of Boudhanath. Atmospheres, as a concept, should be expanded to incorporate sounds which structure people's engagement with a place and direct them towards specific sound practices, often reinforcing Buddhist behaviours and rituals.

The concept of the soundscape was introduced by Schafer (1994) in his investigation and critique of city sounds. For Schafer, a soundscape refers to identifiable aspects of the sonic environment of a place that can be classified into types of sound and are recognisable as such to those who live within that environment. Samuels et al. (2010) engage critically with the concept of the soundscape and argue that it opens new doors for the anthropology of sound to allow the researcher to focus on listening practices and to engage in understanding the materiality of spaces where sound is produced (i.e., temples, churches), as well as to consider how spaces shape sound and are shaped by sound and practices of listening. So, what is the soundscape of Boudhanath and what ways of listening and knowing does it produce?

The soundscape of Boudhanath is embedded in the rich Buddhist tradition it supports. The configuration of life in the area, and more specifically around the stupa, is based on different aspects of Buddhism. On the one hand, the 100+ monasteries in the district are sonic markers and their daily practices offer a rhythm to community life. For example, the 4 am gongs and bells may be a sonic signal to start the day for the monks and the nearby community. Daily

pujas are announced by the sound signals set in motion by chau gongs. Once they ring, the monks and the lay population head to the temple for prayers. The stupa also has its own keynote sound for example: the sounds of the 147 praying wheels, a variety of bells, and the sounds of rosaries or the mantras and chants performed by the Buddhists. All these sounds accompany the daily activities of those living nearby. One mantra that is particularly popular amongst the locals is om mani padme hung. According to Buddhist literature, om is a sacred sound and signifies the vibration of the universe or 'pure' reality. While there is one way to recite the mantra, in Boudhanath I have heard many variations of the soundmark. Surrounding the stupa and the monasteries, one may hear the soundmarks of cassettes playing mantras in/emanating from the dharma shops. The mantras are recited through the loudspeakers, enriching the meditative atmosphere of the area. In the context of the Cairo soundscape, Hirsckind (2001) argues that sermon cassettes and Quran tapes influence his informants into reconstructing their moral economy and reshaping their ethical behaviours. Moreover, the use of technology in this instance is seen as one that is 'mediated by traditions of social practice' (Benjamin 1968 in Hirsckind 2001, p 625), embedding different sensory histories and experiences. In Boudhanath, I did not find that my informants used these cassettes – local shops played them to attract tourists. The sounds of Buddhist rituals, religious objects (i.e., bells, preying wheels) or the sounds of mantras become keynote sounds and are a constant in the Boudhanath soundscape, creating what McCurry (2012) calls a 'liquid soundscape'. In his research with Sufi practitioners in the Balkans, McCurry, focused on how sound mediates a sense of place and ethnic difference in cities. He embraces the notion of a liquid soundscape by reflecting on the relationships between fixed sonic places, such as buildings, and movement between them, as a process of fluid sound co-production.

The relationships between the monasteries or the stupa and people's everyday interactions are entangled with the rhythms of religious life and are structured by normative behaviours relating to a place of worship. Yet the soundmarks of the stupa are produced by the movement of people and their interaction with the stupa.

The religious sounds of Boudhanath generated embodied experiences for the local community, who developed particular sound production habits in the place of worship. Similarly, practitioners developed listening practices in relation to the sounds produced in the monasteries or the stupa area. Eisenberg (2013) links habitual listening, as well as habitual production, to community identity and community privacy. His research on the sonic public spaces of Muslim-Swahili communities in Mombasa, Kenya, illustrates that communitarian privacy is generated by affective bodily practices employed in habituated modes of listening. The specificity of Swahili mosques is that their calls for prayer are situated at ear level and not high up in minarets. In this context, sacred sound has the power to create a sacred place: 'sounded sacred words link the material world to the immaterial realm of God' (Eisenberg, 2013, p. 194). In Boudhanath, the sounds of religious objects are usually set into motion by practitioners, either by sounding a bell, turning a prayer wheel or chanting. The practice of sound production generates within the practitioner the benefits of the actions of producing sounds, allowing for an embodiment of beliefs through sound movements. Habitual listening is also evident by people's engagements with monastic sounds that symbolise the start of a puja or a call for prayers. The sounds of the chao gongs are not usually broadcasted, and people pay close attention to hear their calls as well as to differentiate the sounds produced. For example, one can differentiate the sounds of a call for puja to those of a call for monks to

come to dinner. Other forms of habitual sound production and listening are conveyed in habits of relatedness to places of worship. For example, one may pause a conversation with a friend before entering the stupa area in an act of paying respect. Similar practices of engaging in silence are also performed when exiting a monastery. Likewise, mantra recitations often start at the entrance areas around the stupa.

The religious sounds around Boudhanath operate as keynote sounds and soundmarks. The same can also be said about the sounds of chod. The Buddhist communities that live around the stupa often engage in Buddhist sound practices (i.e., chanting mantras around the stupa), which begs the question if sound can be seen as one of the components of community building, especially in communities of practice such as chod. Sound communities, a term coined by ethnomusicologist Titon (2015, p. 23), refer to communities that are 'established and maintained by acoustic communication'. In Titon's view, sound accounts for presence and serves as a medium of communication. Sound communities, according to Titon, are participatory and equal, and they form relations through practices of listening and sound creation in an intersubjective way. In the case of chod practitioners, I consider sound as one of the aspects of community building that cannot be separated from the dense network of wider sensorial experiences and the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy they are embedded in. Sound production practices, such as chanting or playing an instrument, help build communities of practice. Here I ask: what kind of sound community is at work in Boudhanath? Turner's *communitas*, usually used in reference to pilgrimage, is a useful concept to classify sound communities. In Turner's view, *communitas* describes an unstructured or lightly structured society where individuals 'submit together to the general authority of the ritually

elders' (1969, p. 96). Reflecting on Turner's categories, the area surrounding the stupa can be considered a place where existential *communitas* or spontaneous *communitas* arise due to the relevance of the stupa in pilgrimage and as a place of worship. At the stupa, people often engage in sound production practice (i.e., chanting, mantra recitation) or in practices of hearing (i.e., listening to mantras or cassettes playing meditative music) that are often conducted individually but together alongside other practitioners engaged in similar activities (i.e., chanting mantras while circumambulating the stupa). On the other hand, chod group practices can be placed in the category of normative *communitas*, which relate to societies that come together in a more organised space. In both cases, sound acts as a capacitor for shared experience, where individuals participate in community building activities, such as aural teaching practices. I suggest that sonic practices like chod have the capacity to create sonic *communitas* through practices of aural teaching, sonic adjustments of musical instruments and voices to tones, rhythms and pitches, as well as body adjustments and sound embodiment.

## **4. Sonic atmospheres and transduction**

### **4.1 Sonic Atmospheres**

The sonic elements of the chod ritual were often described by my informants as creating a type of 'specific feeling', especially during the group practice. With *rasa* theory we observed how the text of chod was written with specific sonic effects in mind. Here I am interested in how these texts/sonic effects manifest in these 'specific feelings' my informants reported in their group practice. The sound of chod may communicate or give rise to certain emotions in

people. For example, Diane experiences a feeling of deep peace, growing compassion and being blessed while practicing chod in a group. Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche mentioned during a chod practice: “I can feel how this chod group practice made us a little kinder, calmer and cleaner”. For Chogyi, chod is the practice where all practitioners are “moving together in one direction”. During her first group practices and visualisation, Griva mentioned that she felt scared during the lujin practice, as cutting the body, even in a visualisation, is no easy task. To critically engage with the feelings that the chants of chod create within and between practitioners, I employ the concept of ‘atmosphere’. In Riedel’s view (2020, p. 4), following Hermann Schmitz, atmosphere ‘describes a feeling that fundamentally exceeds an individual body or consciousness subject, and instead pertains primarily to the overall situation in which a multiplicity of bodies cohere’. The concept entails a move from describing feelings as belonging to an individual to promote an understanding of emotions as belonging to the environment, the material, and as ‘subjective’ (Vadén & Torvinen, 2014). In this way, atmospheres are the in-between subject and object experiences, situated in a shared affective space (ibid, p 213). Riedel (2020) sees atmospheres as distinctive to emotions, which are usually ascribed and centred in an individual body; atmospheres may be encountered outside the body in the environment, and they exist regardless of a body. Sound, seen as atmosphere, moves beyond the individual experience situated in a body to consider the ‘cultural techniques by which music and sound are (made) environmental and through which they modulate spaces, collectives, situations and relations’ (ibid, p 213). A second distinction Riedel (2020) makes is between affect and atmospheres, where affect is described as the relational mode between bodies. While both concepts touch on concerns of materiality and relationality, atmosphere is different from affect in that it incorporates a multitude of bodies

and points of impact, much like the climate affects the totality of individuals in a given place. Atmospheres in this perspective impact the totality of the environment as well as the individual bodies that belong to them. The concept of atmosphere aids me in moving beyond the critiques of soundscape as a reification of sound independent from listening and experience.

Andrew McGrew (2016) understands the concept of atmosphere as an 'affective process', where an experience of sound is not simply a transfer of information, but a contextually specific experience, which permeates notions of society and history to incorporate a singular situational context. This interpretation highlights the concept of atmosphere as a mode of crossing the dualities of 'individual and environment, matter and mind, body and self, discourse and feeling as no longer opposite but fused into seamless continuums' (Riedel, 2020, p. 13). It is critical to include in this understanding the temporality of atmospheric socialites, as they reflect the ephemerality of sound and thus, according to McGrew (2016), they should be understood as a process. The process of sound making can then be employed to investigate the 'production of community through music' (ibid, p 141), and consequently to examine the identity of a community through practices of sound making. Riedel's research with a group of Christians in Germany underlined that through the atmospheric relations created during Sunday worship practices through devotional silence and singing, the group experienced a 'sedimentation of social relations and an increasingly distinct musical culture, which in turn only intensified the atmospheric alterity of the service' (Riedel, 2020, p. 16). Engelhardt's (2015) research with an Estonian orthodox Christian congregation points out that the atmospheric relations established during vocalisation practices create a sense of



belonging to the group through music practices, as well as establishing norms for what the group considered 'proper' musical practices. While the focus of this chapter is mostly on individual aspects of sound experience, I find it necessary to emphasize the diverse effects sounds have on group practices, especially from the sonic quality of chod music as it gives rise to emotions.

Turner (2020), in her work in Oran with Algerian Sufi, underlined that atmosphere (hāl) in the context of dīwāl ritual music is more than an 'ephemeral feeling' – it helps to structure norms and actions for the ritual partakers in sound production. Hāl, described here as a synonym for the concept of atmosphere, is a state that helps induce a trance, especially for therapeutic reasons. The trancers (jedebbīn) partake in this ritual due to 'some kind of mental-emotional or physical suffering from which trance, the shifting of consciousness through the body, serves as a therapeutic release' (Turner 2020, p. 1). The performance of trance in this situation relies heavily on several songs usually attributed to Islamic prophets, saints, spirits, jinns or historical figures. The songs carry with them the stories of these important characters as well as asking for their presence to manifest. The atmospheric relations in this context are related to the power of sound in making the song's character present in the ritual, offering in this way a sense of identity to the atmosphere created. The sufi diwal trance ritual has many elements in common with chod, specifically in the area of emotional regulations, identity alteration or the connection to a divine figure to address questions of the self. While there are also many differences, a comparison in this case can highlight aspects of sonic atmospheres that are relevant in the case of chod practitioners.

The atmospheres brought into presence by the songs used in the dīwāl ritual are not only characterised by the ritual elements used for each specific song but also by the different feelings that participants report as part of these atmospheres. For example, Turner suggests that the atmospheres associated with songs about saints create a different atmosphere from those related to spirits. The atmospheres described by Turner contain a whole 'affective milieu' which may harm participants due to the lack of control or influence they may have in the spiritual domain. The special limitations of this affective milieu are scrutinised by Turner, who questions where atmosphere starts and it ends, what it contains and what does it not include. Boehme (2013) characterises atmospheres as ontologically unstable due to the ephemerality of sound: as soon as sound penetrates a medium, it starts to dissipate. Turner describes atmospheres in the context of dīwāl as stable ontologies in motion that create specific affective states, and points out that the atmosphere is judged in this case by whether or not it produces the 'right feeling'. In this way, atmosphere is understood as not only a way to understand how 'we inhabit a space but also how space inhabits us' (Turner 2020, p. 20).

## **4.2 Transduction**

In the previous sections I approached the sound of chod through the lenses of communities of practice and atmospheres, focusing on the collective aspects of sound production and experience. While chod is often practiced in a group, my informants also engaged in individual chod practices. The experience of group practitioners and individual practitioners may differ (i.e., length of practice, intensity, tonality, or duration), yet each set of experiences informs

and builds upon the other. In this section, I turn my focus to the sound production mechanism involved in chod, specifically looking at the qualities of the materials that produce sound. As we saw above, rasa theory denotes a mode of writing chod text to give rise to certain emotions. Simultaneously, the tantric texts of chod prescribe that certain musical instruments possess specific qualities and should be made from specific materials. For example, the damaru was originally constructed by placing two skulls together, one of a 16 year old boy and one of a 16 year old girl (Chaoul, 2009a, p. 54). Alongside the age, the texts prescribe specifics: it is best to use the skulls of children who died accidentally and were not sick, that the skulls should have no lines, should resemble the colour of an eggshell, and have 'a fontanel large enough so that when filled with yoghurt it cannot hold it' (ibid). The qualities of the damaru described above would signify that the child achieved a good transference of consciousness at the time of death (pho ba practice). Many of these characteristics are symbolic and they derive from Buddhist philosophy. For example, the representation of the connection between a boy and a girl in a damaru symbolises the connection between method and insight, yet the sound these skulls make together became the established quality of what a damaru should sound like. The modern damaru is an adaptation of the original, but it still maintains some of the sound qualities of the canonical design as well as the overall look. Diane mentioned the connection between the drum and the body: "your body is involved, you feel that the drumbeat is like your heartbeat, you feel that chod does something psychological and physical to you". Treating sound as a vibration invites further investigation into how the connection between materials and the body is realised and what effects this has on practitioners as well as the way sound is constructed and listening practices are taught. I will

further explore this through the concept of transduction, understood as a process of energy translation from one medium to another (Helmreich, 2007).

Patrick Eisenlohr (2018, p. 8) engages the concept of transduction to capture its 'potentiality and generative capacities.' In his work with Mauritanian Muslim na't practitioners, Eisenlohr's approach to transduction focuses on the process of individuation, specifically on the interaction between bodily sensations, the psychic and the immersive forces of sound to create new sensations of 'being profoundly seized and moved by a voice' (ibid, p 8). Moreover, Eisenlohr considers transduction as a key part of a sonic atmosphere. Sonic atmospheres, in his view, act on bodies to create a perception of movement through the immersion of energies created by changes in air pressure. The voice, the main sonic element Eisenlohr engages with, is a transducer agent that acts on Muslim bodies to bring them closer to the experience of the divine. Religious mediation by the voice, in this case, is an engagement of discursive and transductive modes. In other words, the vibration of vocal cords creates differences in air pressure that are transduced by bodies that transform this energy into new types of energy in the process of sound absorption – an action that creates emotions and feelings. Transduction is therefore a useful concept to investigate the ways in which sound vibrations transform into specific feelings.

In one example, Eisenlohr (2018) describes how a na't reciter at a wedding created a ripple effect through his voice. By placing his emotions into the poem, he delivered, the reciter moved energy through the wedding guests in a way that touched them and made them cry. The energy from his voice affected the feelings of the guests in a similar way to how throwing

a stone in water restructures the movement of water molecules in concentric circles. Further, one can argue that these 'new energies' are further transduced and embedded in a cultural milieu. People's interactions with sonic atmospheres are directed by learned experiences, histories, social norms, and practices of listening specific to the religious context at hand. Conversely, the transductive process requires particular spaces, materials, and performing skills, as well as training on the part of the listener to provoke the desired effect. In the case of the above na't reciter, the wedding guests were receptive because they were trained listeners and expected these kinds of performances at a wedding. In addition, the guests were also aware of the recent passing of the bride's father, an event that made them more susceptible to sadness. Besides the sad event that happened prior to the wedding, by virtue of attending a wedding, the guests expected to hear a na't performer and therefore potentially expected themselves to be moved by his performance. In short, the audience had specific listening training embedded in their cultural milieu. Alongside the audience's training, Eisenlohr (ibid) writes that the performer must also be properly prepared to perform for the specific audience: he should be dressed appropriately, have the proper conduct, and the right voice. In the case of Islam, Eisenlohr argues that the preparedness of the audience and the performer are not simply related to emotional availability or vocal abilities but to one's devotion to rituals, worship and the values and conduct of Islamic life.

In the context of the chod practice, my informants talked about the immersive capacities of sound as well as the ability of sound to move them in an emotional direction upon which they were able to act. Lama Kelsang, a white robed dressed monk and dedicated chod practitioner, related his first encounter with the music of Dudjum chod:

*We were on a retreat, and I was not initiated in the practice of chod, each day we had a morning puja and an evening puja. In the evening puja they included a concise practice of the body offering – Rains of Accumulations – and I remember clear as day, I remember the sound, the melody [he then chants the rhythm heard that day], a room full of 30 plus retreat practitioners, and the bells, the kangling, the rhythm, and Rinpoche leading from his throne and the theatrics and the performativity of the practice. I was always a musician, my strongest and most profound meditative experiences were always in this moment where mind speech and body come together, where mind is in the flow state, speech is singing the lyrics and body is playing the instruments. I remember. I don't actually have a word for it so I will use something cheesy like an "outer body experience" where I separated from this notion of self and place and floated. I remember that I went to my room and I couldn't sleep that night, I just lay there in the black asking myself what just happened to me, and I said: whatever that practice is, that is my practice. When I look back at that day, I think the sound is so seductive, the melodies are so haunting.*

In Kelsang's case, we can clearly observe the effects of the music of chod on him. With no previous training in chod, he felt moved by the sonic atmosphere and performative aspect of the practice. The effects of the sound of chod on Kelsang have been accentuated by the location of the practice, the retreat centre. In retreat centres, there is usually a specific code of conduct that participants are required to observe. They engage in specific ritual practise on a day-to-day basis, and they usually participate with a specific purpose in mind. In Kelsang's case, he wished to deepen his understanding of Buddhism and connect to his teacher. The music of chod, inspired by the sounds of the cremation grounds and the use of bone

instruments to create a type of eerie sound (Cupchik, 2013), generated an experience that Kelsang felt from the first day he heard a chod practice. The sonic atmosphere generated by the instruments being played and the theatrics of the practice lead him to make chod his practice, and one that he is now fully dedicated to. For Kelsang, the sound of chod had a powerful transformative influence on a personal level, inspiring the chopa that he is today. Similar to the ripple effects that Eisenlohr describes, one of Mumford's (1989, p. 209) informants expresses that through chod all beings move forward as one rather than individually. In his view, by engaging all sort of beings in the chants and visualisations, all practitioners are affected by the benefits of chod and therefore they all progress on the path of dharma together. Here we see how the concept of transduction as a sonic atmosphere is helpful in explaining the interplay between the religious experience of chod and the role of sound in emotional regulation.

Reflecting on the stupa soundscape and informed by Eisenlohr's (2018) approach, we see that the conditions for transductions as transformations of energy are met. The social and cultural norms associated with the stupa direct Buddhists towards embodying specific behaviour in the nearby area. According to my Tibetan language teacher, the awareness that the stupa 'watches' you encourages people to engage in normative Buddhist behaviours and worshipping practices. Feld (1996) argues that through practices of sound perception in a place, one develops a mode of attuning the body to the surroundings. The associations people have with the stupa together with their worshipping practices, act transductively to create an experience closer to the divine, which in this case translates into a peaceful feeling. My informants often described the stupa area as one where they find peace or a place where

they feel content. Griva mentioned: “each place of practice gives a different feeling, when I practice chod by the stupa I feel very peaceful”. Sound as sonic atmosphere structures the felt space by becoming a bodily sensation. People’s engagement with the stupa promotes specific sounds, such as mantra recitation, chanting, prayers, or as places of silence. The clockwise movement of people around the stupa influences the directionality of sound. The sound of the area, together with the visual qualities of the stupa and beliefs, move people to react, feel, and behave in particular ways. I argue, following Turner, that those processes of sound production in Boudhanath stupa form modes of inhabiting space as well as modes for space to inhabit practitioners.

## **5. Aural teaching practices**

In the previous chapter, I explored the modes of learning to visualise and some of the intricacies of vision. While the interior aspects of learning to visualise and one’s experience of visualisations are more readily available to the practitioner, the sonic side of chod performance is more easily accessible to an anthropologist or to an external audience. When I reflect on the modes of learning to visualise in comparison to the modes of learning to perform chod sonically, I can identify a series of bodily sensorial practices required to produce the ‘right’ sound. Here I differentiate several sonic teaching practices. First, practitioners learn to listen to the music and the teachings of chod. Second, they learn to perform the music of chod via instruments and chants. Finally, they learn to engage through hearing the music and chants along with the sounds of the environment. Each process implies a different learning practice and a different sensorial modality. I agree with Weidman (2012, p. 218) and recognise



that learning to practice music, such as that of chod, is a bodily experience and involves an engagement with a range of sensorial practices. I identify some of the sensorial modalities as the sense of touch (i.e., handling of instruments), kinaesthesia (i.e., learning the correct movements for playing the instruments), proprioception (i.e., the awareness of achieving the right sound), vision (i.e., visualisations as well as awareness), and listening (i.e., attuning the body, the rhythm and voice to the group chants) (ibid). During the process of learning to perform chod music, two specific elements come together in producing the music: an attuning the body to the instruments and voice, as well as a deep listening practice listening to the teacher's instructions or the group's performance. One can observe that the practice of learning chod affects all senses and engages the practitioner in a bodily transformation through a combination of physical and mental mimetic acts. I argue that all these elements are important for generating the sonic atmospheres necessary for the practice of chod.

Chod therefore is not simply a mode of practice but a mode of fashioning individuals in a specific way. To build further on the construction of the sonic atmospheres mediated through chod, one can argue that these are constructed through learning practices taught by masters to their students. Einsenlohr (2018) argues for the need for preparedness from both the audience as well as the performer to engage transductively in sonic atmospheres. Yet how does this translate into practice? I identify transductive acts, understood as modes of transforming one type of energy into another, in all aspects of learning chod, from the moment one first engaged/listened to chod, to the experience of the ceremony of empowerment and the modes of learning associated with the master-apprentice relationship.

In the following section, I explore these aspects by reflecting on ethnographic data collected during my sonic apprenticeship with Yeshe.

## 6. Bodily modelling

Weidman (2012), in her work as an apprentice with a Karnatic music master in South India, identifies sonic apprenticeships as modes of body modelling, where novice musicians learn through imitation by watching the master's body and by fashioning their own in the mimetic act of copying. In the previous chapter, I wrote about the lotus position as a crucial body modelling technique. While this is a popular body position in many monastic settings and day-to-day activities (i.e., sitting at a table), it also proves central to learning and correctly performing the sonic aspects of chod. For example, the way the bell and the drum are held during chod is in direct relation to the position of the body in the lotus position. Here I detail how I learnt to play chod from my teacher.

Yeshe started teaching me the sonic aspects of chod with an introduction to each instrument's symbolism and meaning. He then offered me instruction on how to hold the bell correctly, both for reasons of orthodoxy as well as to make a good quality of sound:

*“While seated in the lotus position, you have to hold the bell in the direction of the heart with the left hand. You only use three fingers to hold it, the index finger helps you to move it, while the small finger helps you to stop it. The face of Virochana, a deity, on the bell should be looking at you, and your thumb should cover it. The*

*movement is gentle and predominantly from the wrist, when you start playing the bell you move it together with the hand while afterwards, the movement is predominantly from the wrist. The kangling is hard and it is not appropriate for you to start learning it now, but you can try it. First, you make your lips like a small hole and you blow thru it while you then hold the kangling from the middle.”*

I tried several times, but I failed to produce any sound.



Fig. 4.2

When we moved towards learning to play the damaru, Yeshe showed me the movement with his empty hands first. “The damaru needs to be played with the right hand (male hand) while the bell is played with the left one (female hand)”. The position of the hand and the proper

grasping of the instruments, in Yeshe's view, are vital for obtaining a good sound. I engaged in a mimetic act of copying his movements and used numbers to count the movement from left to right in the air. After a few minutes he gave me the damaru and I put into practice the movements, it took me a week of practice to get the sound somewhat right. The sound of the damaru is made by two beats, one on each side of the drum, and they must both hit the drum's surface at the same time to produce a good sound. The damaru's sound is produced by moving the hand in a clockwise-counter-clockwise direction, and the rhythm is given by the speed of the hand movement.

*"You need to hold the damaru with the thumb and the index finger, the position of your arm should be close to the body but not too close, otherwise you sweat. The hand needs to be around 10-15 cm from the shoulder. In this way, the sound is good, and you will not hurt your shoulder. The only part that is moving is your wrist. You start with a slow rhythm, as slowly as you can; you need to learn to hit the surfaces with both beats at the same time. You need to balance the drum to be able to produce a proper sound. The movement needs to be liquid, do not make any abrupt or uncontrolled movements; you need to feel the time the beats need to return to hit the opposite surface fluidly. You can start with this six beats rhythm, slowly and you count, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and you start again. Now hold the bell in the heart direction and play the rhythm, the bell will help you balance the movement. Once you learn this you take the bell and play it together with the chanting."*

The elements presented above highlight a form of bodily enculturation in the process of sound transduction, from the elements that constitute the instruments to the sound they produce. Yeshe's explanations of the symbolism of the instruments and the emphasis he placed on their importance changed my attitude towards them, to see them not simply as instruments but as valuable objects. The energy placed in the action of moving each instrument, in the case of the drum and bell, resonated through my body and created a vibration by setting the components of the instruments in motion, components that generated a vibration that I felt back in the body. This sense of proprioception helped me to identify if I was producing the right sound. In most cases, I recognised that I was not producing the right sound, but I was not able to identify what I needed to do to correct myself. Yeshe offered me suggestions on how to improve. Most of his corrections were based on my body posture and the way I held the instruments. While I understood the idea behind the sound and the way I should move the instruments, at the time I did not develop the embodiment required to produce the sound, specifically the muscle memory Yeshe had. Wacquant (in Widman 2012, p 223) suggests that 'the function of pedagogical work is to replace the savage body with a body habituated, that is temporarily structured and kinetically remodelled according to the specific demands of the field'. Muscle memory is something that is made in the body and it is a process where the embodiment of the teacher, through constant repetitions and readjustments, slowly translates into the embodiment of the student. Refashioning my body based on Yeshe's pedagogy and experience transformed my posture into a technical skill.

Weidman (2012, p. 212), by appealing to Mauss's concept of the 'techniques of the body', argues that musicians in apprenticeships develop embodied knowledge in relations with their masters not only through language but through embodied feelings and aesthetic sensibilities. This was clear in my case: my proficiency in playing the instruments was directly linked to the energy Yeshe placed in modelling his body and the explanations he gave for each step. My body attuned to his in a transductive way, allowing for an improvement of my practice, which was further reinforced by his corrections and my repetitions. As we progressed, his explanations for fashioning my body became more specific, and they were based on the energy generated by my wrongdoings. Downey (2007), in his work with capoeira practitioners, writes of the physical education required to fashion the body in specific postures to produce the desired techniques. Similarly, musical training in chod practice requires one to develop muscle memory and to fashion the body in specific postures to be able to correctly perform the sounds of chod. The development of muscle memory has a more in-depth purpose here. While the correct sound is desired, the main reason for developing muscle memory, as Yeshe explained and as I observed in my own practice, is to free the mind from focusing on bodily aspects and allow it to focus on the mental requirements of chod. In practice, my informants from the Mother's group, the Patan group and the Ka-Nnying Shedrub, often found creative ways of holding the instruments, yet they were closely related to the teachings that I received.

## 6.1 Technique before melody

The focus on modes of sound production and sonic embodiments have directed anthropologists to consider the voice as a sonic phenomenon, and to focus on its multiple registers, such as timbre. Words may have the power to ‘create the world, to bring forth space, time, and material reality (indeed to be reality itself), as well as to meditate, purify, and for healing purposes’ (Hackett, 2020, p. 491). While the study of words and their symbolism in religious texts have been at the centre of religious studies for a long time, the features of the voice and the way it affects religious communities have received little attention. Einsenlohr (2018, p. 79) suggests that there is a powerful connection between the vocal performance of a na’t reciter and the religious experience of na’t. His research participants emphasised that the experience of being touched by the voice is one of the most important elements of na’t. In the case of chod and the chants specifically, my informants said that they felt dragged in to listen, they felt invited – they felt a sensation that may be interpreted as a sonic atmosphere. These reports are interesting because one of the purposes of chod is to invite different beings to come and listen to the ceremony and feast from the offerings. The impact of the sonic dimension of chod on the body of non-practitioners makes bodies perform actions that may have not been in their intentions, as Tenzin said: “the lady down the road from my house, the one that sells Dharma objects, she is part of a chod group. When I walk by her chod group and listen to them singing, I feel invited by the music and I often go inside and listen to the practice.” In this case, one can observe that there is no persuasion involved in inviting anyone to listen; the transductive energy of the chants, engaged through the act of listening, becomes a transformative drive for the listener to perform certain actions, such as attending the puja or, in the case of Diane or Griva, to start

learning chod themselves. The act of listening becomes an act of invitation. What elements of chod allow for such interactions to take place? How is chod music taught to create a sonic atmosphere? To answer these questions, I engage with Yeshe's pedagogy for teaching chod chants. My teacher's pedagogy was methodical, and he offered precise instructions based on my wrongdoings, as I mentioned in the previous section. Once we moved onto chod chants, he emphasised that I needed to learn the music thoroughly, and his main focus was on rhythm, breathing, cadence and tone. He emphasised that I may learn the rhythm and the tones (the technical side) of chod fast but that the melody (tib. glu dbyangs) would come later based on my understandings and emotions. I suggest that the technique of learning chod leads one towards building the musical capacities needed to attune the music of chod to one's emotions, and that learning the melody leads towards the construction of sonic atmospheres.

Before starting chod chanting, Yeshe put together a list of chants with instructions for the first part of the practice (fig. 4.3). Yeshe asked me to first read the text in Tibetan. Afterwards, he began chanting and started tapping a 'rhythm' with his index finger on the surface of the table next to us, producing a short sound with his nail. His nail touched the surface of the table at the point where a word was pronounced. The rhythm Yeshe produced by tapping his finger would later be played on the damaru. Yeshe demonstrated a few times and then asked me to do it myself, but he kept playing the rhythm of the chant on the table while I was trying. According to my teacher, the chant was recited "from a pure vision: the laughter of Troma which overcomes and suppresses through splendour" – it was a chant that calls Troma and did not require the use of musical instruments. I was not allowed to recite the first three syllables of the chant: 'phat, phat, phat', as these are "powerful" (Yeshe) and should only be



recited by the chant master (unten), and the melody should be uttered “like a child that calls after the mother” (Yeshe). It is common for practitioners to recite the chant when they practise by themselves at home. What Yeshe called “the real chanting”, is a chant that is sung in the melody of chod rather than the usual monastic chanting tradition. Yeshe initially started singing by indicating the inflexions in the voice with his finger, pointing up and down in the same way as his voice would go up and down. He then began the rhythm with his finger, this time constant with a  $\frac{1}{4}$  beat. The first line of the chant is usually chanted only by the chant master and not the public, except for solo practitioners. Once Yeshe realised that I struggled to follow the rhythm, he decided to help my learning with a visual aid by drawing the cadence, as seen in fig 4.4.

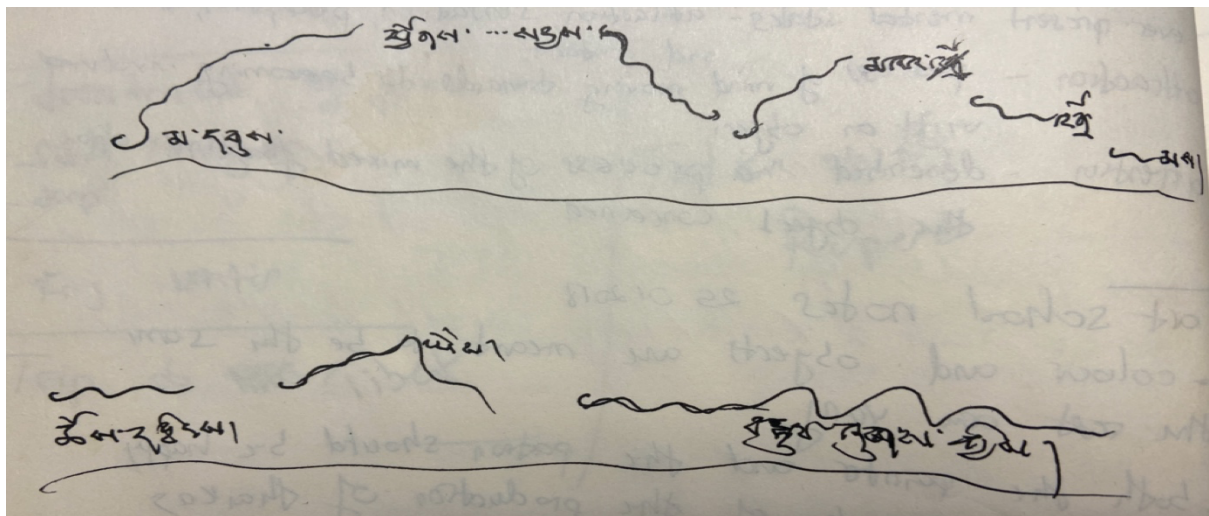


Fig. 4.3

**CHANTING LIST of KRODIKALI SADHAN**

1	དཔང་རྒྱུ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ཀྱི་མཚན་ལོ་མེད་	General Melody of <b>Suppression Through Splendor.</b>	3 times trumpet with roll up Drum&Bell. Roll the drum to conclude.
2	བུ་རྒྱུ་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	1 Suppl. of Summoning the essence 2. Beautiful pearl rosary 3.Lineage of enlightd Embodiments.	Chanting only
3	སྐྱེས་པའི་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ གཞུང་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Calling upon lama" Transferring to the City of "Three vajras"	1. Trumpet 3 times with drum& bell. 2. Brief crescendo on the drum.
4	སྐྱེས་པའི་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Refuge and Bodhicitta:	Chanting& bell only. Vajra- summoning mudra.
5	ཚོགས་པའི་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Seven Branches prayers:	While extend the Vajra and ring the bell.
6	ཕྱིན་པའི་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Descent of blessings:	3 times trumpet& drum, bell
7	མཚན་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	The consecration of Offering Materials:	3 times trumpet& drum, bell
8	ལྷ་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Creating Mandala of deity: Hold the Vajra&ring the bell. Drawing in Vajra.	1. 3 times trumpet& drum, bell 2. Break with drum.
9	སྐྱེས་པའི་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	The Invocation:	4 times trumpet& drum, bell
10	ཕུགས་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Request to Remain:	3 times trumpet& drum, bell
11	མཚན་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Offerings/ Homage	
12	བཞུགས་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	The Praise:	1)1 time trumpet& drum, bell 2) A crescendo on the drum,bell. 3) Put the drum& bell their places.
13	རྒྱུ་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Profound Intention for Mantra Recitation Visualization. - Offering/Praise (double break on drum)	1.Mantra for stage of approach(1000 2.Stage of accomplishment(500 3.Stage of enactment.(100
14	རྒྱུ་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Prayer for Four-Life force holding treasure guardians: Naga, Death Lords, Tsen-king, Mule.	3 times trumpet& drum, bell (break on drum) Tea beer -Libation.
15	གཞུང་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Great Guardians Rahula: Medicine, Rakta, Torma. (double break & single break on drum)	Hundred-syllables. Play trumpet& drum, bell
16	ཚོགས་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	General Fulfilment Prayer for the Dharma protectors.	(Space treasury -mudra.) Drum& bell only
17	བཞུགས་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་ལོ་མེད་	Confession (Hundred-syllables.)	Chanting only

Fig. 4.4

Even so, I still struggled to follow the undulations in the syllables. Yeshe then focused on adjusting my breathing: “You don’t breathe properly, you need to take a long breath, you need to pay attention to the breaks, the ‘chook’ syllable has a rest to it, if you don’t rest you can’t go higher on the ‘sang’. You don’t breathe on the rest; it is all in one breath.” He made me sign the first line for about 25 minutes until each note, syllable, and cadence sounded properly. I would repeat the first half of the first line after Yeshe and he would then correct me on my cadence and the notes by pointing out what I did wrong and then correctly chanting it himself. The main issues were with the pauses and in the transition from lower to higher notes, as well as the voice undulation on the notes. Yeshe and I laughed a lot as I continued to get it very wrong for several weeks. Week after week I would slowly attune to the sounds

and the movements required to produce a satisfying sound, developing in this way my education of attention. As Yeshe told me:

*“You got the rhythm, but you have no melody in your chant, once you exercise more your rhythm the melody will come. Your chanting comes from the mouth, but it should be from the throat/chest area, sing it from there. Don’t worry, I used to be the same when I learnt. We learn in the same way at the monastery, it takes a long time to learn. We had around 20-25 student per class, but the teacher did not always have time to come to everybody, so I had to look for the teacher privately and do a lot of work by myself. Some monks play the instrument very nicely, some not that well, as maybe they didn’t get the chance to learn properly in the monastery. This is how monastic education works in general. You have to be very polite and very quick.”*

Going back to the questions I posed at the beginning of the section, the techniques of teaching chod invites the chopa to create an emotional connection to the chant of chod, one that is passed from teacher to students and taught in specific ways. The accent put on intonation, rhythms and emotional connection to the chant allow the chopa to mimetically produce a sonic atmosphere.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shifted our focus from ways of seeing to ways of knowing through sound practices. Rasa theory helps to underline the aesthetic concerns expressed by the writers of chod texts and the emphasis they placed on giving rise to certain emotions in the practice of chod: emotions that are further addressed via the cutting practices in visualisations. Rasa

theory highlights how the music production of chod was embedded in the complex soundscape in the writers place of dwelling, and this inspired them to represent soundscapes in the melody structures, such as sky burial ground we saw at the beginning of the chapter. Following this line of thought, here I suggested that the music of chod is still embedded in the complex soundscape of the Boudhanath area, and as such an understanding of chod melodies needs to consider the sonic context in which practice takes place. The sonic context does not only affect the chopas' practice but it also structures the way locals make sense of place. One example is the potentiality of sound to structure day to day activities based on monastic rhythms, such as the ringing of gongs in the monastic establishments. Further, I have highlighted how communities are built and maintained through sound practices, especially in the stupa area. I used the concept of sonic atmospheres to argue that the religious experience of the Buddhist practitioners, especially the chopas, is sonically influenced and shared: these are experiences that transcend individual practitioners and give rise to a shared emotions and feelings. Yet, chod functions not only on a group level but also on an individual level. I employed the concept of transduction to further understand how sound can be understood as a vibration that aids practices of individuation through the transfer of energy from materials (i.e., instruments) to the chopas and the wider environment. In the final section of the chapter, I examined how sound practices are taught by monastics to perpetuate the chod tradition. I demonstrated that aural teachings follow a methodical approach and rely on body modelling and practices of attunement to the teacher's body and instructions. Alongside teaching a method of producing sound, the lams also teach practitioners specific conducts and modes of listening and engaging with sound practices. All in all, the sonic elements of chod act as supports for visualisations and meditation.

In the introduction I set out the main aim of the thesis as the unpacking of the religious experience of chod in the context of Boudhanath. Following Desjarlais (2003), in this chapter I took a sensorial approach to understand how different sensory modalities fashion selves in communities of chod practitioners. As a practice, chod employs a variety of sensorial practices, yet practitioners relate to these practices through their own experience and often emphasise one over the other. In the last two chapters, I have engaged with vision and sound practices to understand how chopas make sense of chod in their own lived experience through the prism of these sensory modalities, and to understand how they employ them to experience chod and engage with the benefits that arise after practice. In both chapters, I have explored the wider contexts of sound and image production, historical developments, and teachings modalities as well as the details of lived experience. In the next chapter, I focus on the practice of making images and recording sound as modes of engaging with the practice of chod through the medium of film.

# Chapter 6 - Chod: The Journey into Cutting the Self

*Thursday, November 2017: It rained, the water started to evaporate and there was a fresh steamy feeling in the air. The dust disappeared for a moment. I was waiting for Yeshe to come over to talk about chod. We hadn't known each other for long, but we were becoming friends. By this time, he had already introduced me to the musical instruments of chod and I felt ready to start learning chod through the camera. I knew that if I wanted to make a documentary about chod that reflected my informant's experience as well as mine, I had to immerse myself into the practice and sharpen my perception using the microphone and the camera. The first time I attended a chod group practice I felt completely overwhelmed. The sound of the chants and the instruments, the smell of incense, and the abundance of colours overloaded my senses. I left my camera in the bag; I did not know what to focus on or what to do during the ceremony, even if in principle I knew how the ritual was conducted. I had my chod text in front of me and I was meant to follow the group, but I sat silent. Once back home, I realised that there is a complex sensorial universe to be perceived in the monastery hall during the practice, and making a documentary about chod would be very challenging. I approached the topic collaboratively and I hoped Yeshe could direct me on the right path to understand and sense what a film on the topic of chod should look and sound like.*

Before moving forward, I invite the reader to watch the film.

<https://vimeo.com/724256110>

Password: chod2022

Yeshe was keen on making sure that the message and the knowledge communicated in the film reflected the teachings of chod. He emphasised the importance of conveying the correct information and saw the instructional value of the film but did not seem to be concerned about the philosophical questions I had about the practice. Yeshe's focus was on "making sure that you talk and interview the right people, who have empowerment and reading transmission from a good lineage holder". His next piece of advice was to include the Vajra master, Khenpo Pema, in the film. Afterwards, he suggested that I focus on the chants, the instruments, the Krodikali shrine, the tormas, and the other elements of the ritual. He did not think that I needed to include other practitioners, since the Khenpo should be able to tell me all that I need to know about chod. Yet, he was open to introducing me, via Khenpo Pema, to specific lay practitioners to talk about their experience. Following his suggestions, we prepared the interview questions as follows: How are ritual objects made, the tormas, drums, bell etc.? What is the meaning of the 'deity', and what benefits does it bring to one's practice? What are visualisations – a step by step guide on how to visualise, how to 'see' the deity? What is empowerment and how do you receive it? How do you prepare for chod practice? How does chod relate to Buddhism in general? What are the different chod practices and how do they relate to each other? What is the source of chod?

I asked other informants for their views on what a film about chod should include and their answers were mixed. Chopa Tenzin requested approval from his lama to be included in the documentary and asked that I film a chod practice in a cremation ground at night. He insisted on the idea that reality is a projection of our minds and an illusion but that we could show different aspects of this illusion and hopefully the film, also an illusion, would direct others towards seeking emptiness. Chopa Griva expressed interest in the music of chod as the main aspect of the film, while Chopa Diane suggested that I focus on different levels of chod as well as group practices and solo practitioners. It soon became evident that a film about chod should incorporate a variety of perspectives and should focus on what my informants find significant, from orthodoxy to the cremation ground. Yet, how was I to make a film when so many perspectives, including my own, were at stake?

The answer to this question came one day when I was conducting fieldwork in the thangka painting school. As a beginner, I was working on mimetically copying images. In the mornings I drew with a sharp stick on a shiny painted piece of wood covered in a thin layer of butter and chalk powder. In the afternoons, I drew on paper and used colours. During my weeks at the school, I developed my own way of looking at and drawing images, be it in the way I approached shapes, the specific place I started drawing on the canvas, the way I selected colours and the time I applied them, or how I compared sizes and went about reproducing shapes. One day I was asked to draw an elaborate fire with many flames in different directions, and I approached the task based on my understanding of drawing fire directly from the source. When I showed my teacher, I learnt that I was “doing it the wrong way”. My teacher looked at the image and told me that I should start drawing from a different



perspective because the most important thing was not the origins of the fire but the details of the flames. According to the artists' perspective, it was easier to start drawing fire from the outside – I found it easier the other way around. After this lesson, I began to think about the structures of thangkas and how the artists at the school drew. They start with the most important part of the thangka, which is the main deity, and from there, they create spaces for the other deities. They start with lines, they measure and draw diagonals on the canvas, and after this, they measure the proportions of the main deities, and they create circles for them. There is always a circle. Afterwards, in each circle, they contour the forms of the deities. Then they start to draw the body of the deity with the corresponding objects, followed by all the other details. They begin drawing from inside the circle and work towards the outside. Next, they draw the offerings, and then the landscape. Finally, they add colours, then gold, and then all the other small details, ending with the margins. When the painting is finished, the artist takes it to a tailor, who adds the silk cover and frame. The silk frame and the cover are carefully selected to match the colours of the thangka.

Through the engagement of bodily sensations, textures, sounds, images, stories, tones of voices, shades, colours, motion, and music, the film *Chod: The Journey into Cutting the Self*, attempts to capture the experience of my informants as well as my own. Sobchack, in *The Address of the Eye – A phenomenology of Film Experience*, argues that 'the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience' (1992, p. 3). Sobchack, an existential phenomenologist, is interested in the capacity of film to be perceived as sensual material and a sense-making sensuous subject, where the audience

may be an active subject rather than a passive observer. This understanding comes to life in my case, where I use film as both representation and transcendence of representation, in the relationship between my informants, the environment, my own experience of chod, and those that watch the film. In other words, my film alludes to a paradox, where I aim to represent the experience of my informants but also represent the aspects of chod that lie beyond representation, that lie behind surface meaning. By using my own experience of chod, developed in intersubjective relationships with my teachers and informants through the means of film, I hope to bring the audience closer to an experiential understanding of chod.

In this chapter, I build upon theories of representation and visual anthropology to explain the use of film as part of this sensory ethnography. I continue by expanding on two schools of thought filmmakers have previously engaged with to make films exploring Buddhist topics, and review some of the important films on the topic of Buddhism and tantra. I then expand the conversation of ontologies of emptiness and engage with them in the process and structure of making the film. The chapter ends with a discussion about editing and the role of sound in the film.

## **1. Whose story should I tell?**

One of the main challenges I faced in making this film was to understand what and whose story I wish to tell. I realised that my documentary does not have a traditional conflict, in the sense of a clash between two opposing forces that needs to be solved, or a main character that guides the audience on a journey. The end product was not clear to me before fieldwork, while I was filming, nor for the first two years of writing my thesis. After fieldwork, I did not touch the footage as I did not know what to do with it, and I hoped that it would start to make sense later on. After writing the third chapter of the thesis, I started to watch the footage and learnt how to work with it. While watching the footage, I connected with my field notes and I was inspired to write a more evocative and sensorial ethnography, enriched by the details in my notes. Werbner (2011) describes the process of writing after filming as one where the ethnographer reconnects with the field and produces a more situated and evocative ethnography. The more I watched the footage and wrote about acts of seeing and hearing, the storyline of the film started to unfold in front of me. After finishing chapter five, I knew the film had to be in dialogue with the main themes of chapter 3 – ‘ritual economies’, chapter 4 – ‘ways of seeing and knowing through images’, and chapter 5 – ‘ways of hearing and knowing through sonic practices and musical instruments’. The act of writing in this case influenced the structure of the film and helped me realise the gaps that needed to be covered in the film that the thesis did not fully address due to the limitations of the medium of writing. One of these aspects is the act of showing what lies beyond representation, an aspect that I engage with later in the chapter. In addition to the themes mentioned above, in the film I follow the main characters I used in my analysis in the previous chapters, specifically Chopa Tenzin, Chopa Diane, Chopa Griva, Khenpo Yeshe and Khenpo Pema, as well as the damaru and kangling makers. The main areas I write about in the thesis – the landscape of

Boudhanath, the interior of the monasteries and the cremation ground – also became centre stages for the film. However, even with all these details in mind, I still did not have a clear view of the film's storyline.

The film finally started to come together during the editing process. Editing, seen here as a research method, became the main tool that helped me make sense of the role of the film, as well as its content and style. I understand the editing process in a similar way to the double vision discussed in chapter 4. Through editing the film and re-watching the footage, I became aware of myself in the act of seeing through the camera at a distance. Reflecting on this chapter's opening vignette, I put the footage together in categories and themes, based on the experiences of my informants, and I started to think more about the process of thangka making, through the image of the circle, similar to how painters in the Thangka School work. The idea of circles made more sense here because wheels are ever-present motifs in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and art. One famous circle is the wheel of life (fig. 10), or *sipe khorlo* (skt. *bhavachakra*), that was depicted in many paintings in the monasteries around Boudhanath.



Fig. 5.1

The wheel, according to the Divyavadana, was initially chosen by the Buddha to represent the cyclical nature of samsara, including the three poisons (ignorance, attachments and aversion), the six samsara realms, the law of karma, the twelve links to dependant originations, the nature of the mind, the law of liberation, and impermanence. Given this symbolic importance, I considered that the wheel would be a fitting tool to represent the cyclical nature of samsara, karma, impermanence, and emptiness in making a film about chod. This approach correlates with the way Herzog constructed his documentary *Wheel of Time* (2003): a film about faith, religious experiences, and the Kalachakra tantric ritual performed annually by the Dalai Lama. The film portrays the construction of a sand mandala, a type of mandala like those I discuss in chapter 4, which is destroyed at the end of the ceremony. The act of destruction symbolises non-attachment to the physical and spiritual structure of the mandala. The film follows two different Kalachakra ceremonies, one in India and one in Austria. The two ceremonies are linked through the construction of two sand mandalas. Herzog combines the elements of the Kalachakra ritual preparation with the way that the mandala is drawn with sand in emphasising the cyclical nature of the rituals as well as their temporality. This method inspired me to construct a space in my film for presenting the ritual elements of chod in juxtaposition with the experiences of my informants affected by chod. In the *Wheel of Time*, the Kalachakra ritual is the main character, and we observe how the film is a reflection of the ritual through a variety of actors and perspectives. The plot unfolds in two directions, on the one hand we have the ritual itself, which requires specific ritual objects and a larger ritual economy; on the other, we observe the way people dedicate themselves to the ritual, the preparations they undergo to participate in the ritual, and the relationship between their experiences of participating and the effects this has on them. In one of the scenes, we follow practitioners

doing repeat prostrations along their way to Bodhgaya. Once the depiction of prostration ends, the camera moves towards a detailed reflection of the way the body shapes and makes contact with the ground with no voice-over or explanation. The next scene portrays Lama Woesser's journey of over 4000km, making prostrations for over three and a half years, to reach Bodhgaya from Tibet. This is further enhanced with shots of Woesser's wounds on his forehead, hands and legs, portraying an incredible act of faith and sacrifice (Poch, 2019). In this example, we can observe how the interior experience of the faith of pilgrims is portrayed in their physical acts, often through sacrifice, pain, and suffering. In juxtaposing the development of rituals and in portraying aspects of the devotees practice, Herzog creates a space for empathic experience that moves beyond mere representation. Similar to the way the Wheel of Time is constructed, I chose to follow chod as the main character in my film, and the surrounding narrative developed through the practice and perspectives of my informants.

With the structure of the Wheel of Time and the way the thangka painters create the mandalas of the deities through painting in mind, I made a list of the most important elements I should include in the film. I drew a wheel comprised of the following sections: my informants' experience of chod, the ritual of chod, and the area of Boudhanath. Once my 'canvas', to use a painting analogy, was constructed, I thought about what should be drawn in each section of the wheel. My approach was informed by what my informants considered essential material to be included in the film, as well as my own take on chod. In the first section, I depicted my main informants. In the second, I depicted the main ritual objects and aspects of the chod ritual, and in the third section, I depicted the stupa area. The fourth

section of the wheel was composed by the sounds of the chod ritual and the sounds of the environment, while the fifth represented my own views and ideas made visible through the editing process. Once I had the form of the sections sketched, I began thinking about which elements to include within them.

My camera recorded mimetically the images before it in a manner similar to that of the painter that mimetically copies an image onto the cotton cloth on which thangkas are painted. However, while the painter knows precisely how to see in order to determine what he/she needs to copy onto the cloth, I found it challenging to know what to point the camera at during fieldwork to 'see' in the same way. To discover what visible (and audible) elements were important to my informants, I conducted interviews, recorded music, and explored the Boudhanath area and the monastic spaces with the camera. Yeshe and I worked on questions that would reveal aspects of my informants' experience, and as a result I recorded over 30 hours of interviews, of which 10 hours were on camera. We further collaborated in conducting sound recordings and engaged in elaborate recorded discussions on the ritual of chod.

In a similar manner to the film *Wheel of Time*, I explored the possibility of editing together scenes that may provoke an experience beyond the merely visible and symbolic aspects of representation. Chopa Tenzin kept repeating to me during our discussions that "in order to understand chod you need to learn to unlearn conceptually, and experience chod in a non-



conceptual way". I cannot say that I reached a non-conceptual stage in my experience with chod, but I realised that my film required an aspect of this layer of experience, a layer that is purely based on experience and feelings rather than being reliant on a symbolically conceptual framework. In the following section, I focus on the process and the structure of the film.

## **2. Process and structure**

The process of making the film was analogous to my process of discovering and learning chod. Chod practice relies on a set of rules, structures, and modes of perception that I have detailed in the previous chapters. The main research question I posed in chapter 1 was: 'What is the nature of the religious experience of chod?'. Here I extend the question to ask: What should be the nature of the religious experience made accessible through making a film about chod? While chapters one to five focus on offering a possible answer to the first question, here I focus on what can be learnt about the experience of chod through making a film, as well as what may be captured in the film that has not been revealed elsewhere.

The first element I focus on here is the role of the film in describing the field site and immersing the audience within it. This aspect of the film speaks directly to the third chapter of the thesis where I discuss the ritual economies of chod and describe at length the context of my field site. The first two sections of the film aim to bring the audience closer to the environment of Boudhanath. I start the film with an overview of the Kathmandu Valley from Swayambunath stupa, and slowly zoom in on the Tibetan Buddhist part of Kathmandu, my field site. In watching the film, the audience experiences the development of chod both in terms of sound as well as in terms of complexity, describing the journey from novice

practitioners to cremation ground chopas. The next scene introduces the Boudhanath area. The camera acts like a tourist's eye and takes us on a journey from the gate of the stupa to the interiors of the nearby temples. The sound follows the images and changes in intensity as the camera moves from outdoors to indoors. The chaotic and complex soundscape outside the stupa progresses in intensity and variety until reaching the indoor praying wheels walls, where the chants of an old man can be heard, preparing the audience to enter a silent scene in the monastery. The footage is shot predominantly without a tripod and with synchronous sound, from the point of view of a person visiting the area for the first time. The scenes are arranged in such a way as to capture my own experience visiting the Boudhanath stupa for the first time. The journey from the main road outside to the interior is also the way most tourists and local pilgrims first encounter the stupa and enter Boudhanath. I started my journey from the outside and slowly circumambulated the stupa, and the footage captures the variety of sounds and aesthetic sensibility that changes from outside to inside.

The style of this section of the film is observational, and it acts as an invitation into the Buddhist community, working visually on a mimetic level to show the overall appearance of the place. At the same time, the camera in these scenes, as well as in the other observational footage present in the film, provides the audience access to my own sensuous engagement with this world. The images and sounds in these sections are selected to provide an immersive journey from the outside of Kathmandu to the inside of the monastery, and offers a symbolic representation of the way that the orthodoxy of chod, as well as Buddhism overall seeks to help one shift focus from the outside environment to the inside of one's mind (Buddhist translates in Tibetan as *nagpa* – the one that looks inside). The final section takes the audience from the indoor environment to the outside, in the cremation ground. The aim here is to shift

attention to the cyclical nature of learning chod and to introduce the viewer to the Dharma economy of Kathmandu through the representation of Buddhist themed shops, Thangka paintings, as well as the overall industry that has developed around the stupa. The ritual economies section focuses on the two musical instruments makers, and my documentation of the processes of them making the two instruments. For example, the damaru maker is shown discussing at length the way his business grew due to the expansion of chod and the influx of visitors in the area. The kangling maker emphasises his status as a refugee and discloses the secret path of making objects out of human bones that is forbidden by law yet remains vital for the tantric path of chod.

The editing of the Boudhanath landscape and the monasteries are observational in nature. To create these scenes, I followed the paths people usually take to reach the stupa through the main gate. I filmed these without a tripod and with no narrative or heavy editing. I selected the footage for these scenes based on my circumambulation of the stupa and then moved from the outside to the inside of the monastery. The shots of these scenes are long, and they carry with them the sounds of the environment. The making of the damaru and the kangling focus on filming the process of making the instruments. Here, I added together footage shot in the craftsmen's workshops that shows the process of making a drum or a bone trumpet. I edited together footage of the two craftsmen as well as their assistants, and juxtaposed their explanation as well as their experience with the process of making these instruments. The two sections also contain another layer, where the craftsmen detail the connection of the two instruments with chod and the overall practice of Buddhism. The choice of images was driven by the available detail of the process.

I structured the rest of the film around my process of learning chod and learning to film chod, based on the template of the monastic learning path that Yeshe introduced to me. I also offer the audience a chance to hear from lay practitioners, who talk about chod through their experience, as well as from two monks (Khenpo Yeshe and Khenpo Pema) who share with the audience the orthodoxy of the practice and the canonical views. The film ends with Chopa Tenzin in the cremation ground, which is a place that demonstrates the way that the adept should progress on the path of chod, moving from a conceptual to a non-conceptual experiential path that ends with the cutting away of the self. Thus, following the metaphor of the wheel of life, the film starts with Chopa Tenzin and ends with him, moving from a conceptual to a non-conceptual experience. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The soundtrack of the film alternates between moments with low sound intensity to moments of loudness, to allow the audience time to take a breath and reflect on specific scenes. The alternation is also manifest during solo chod practices: both Diane and Griva mentioned that they take time during their individual practice to reflect on their practice, the text of chod, or certain emotions that arise during chod. For Griva and Diane, the moments of rest where no chants and instruments are played, allowed for moments of in-depth introspection where they could focus their attention on the activities being performed. During interviews the background sound is reduced to a minimum, to allow the audience to focus their attention on the specificities of each voice, the language used, and voice tonalities as well as the information conveyed by my informants.

The wheel, as used in thangkas as well as in the cycle of reincarnation, is often described as a symbolic representation of a path or journey. In thinking about this filmically, I took inspiration from other documentaries that approached the topic of tantra. One of these films is Andy Lawrence's documentary *The Lover and the Beloved, a Journey into Tantra* (2011). The storyline follows the journey of a person searching for tantric enlightenment in India. Lawrence's film questions the philosophy of Tantra and explores the processes through which one can obtain enlightenment. The film focuses on stories in which different characters narrate what they believe needs to be done to reach a state of enlightenment. The film presents different perspectives, from laypeople to gurus, allowing the audience to gain insights into tantra from both personal experiences and understandings drawn from Hindu orthodoxies. The filmmaker invites the audience to witness, through the main character, discovery of the different nuances and understandings of tantra. The film begins on a train and ends in a cremation ground. The narrative of the film builds from the moment when we meet the main character and learn about his life, to the final scenes where we obtain an insight into the world of the ascetic tantric practitioners in the cremation ground. In my case, I start and end in the cremation ground to emphasise the circulatory and illusory nature of the self, as related by Chopa Tenzin. The first interview in the film is with Chopa Griva, a beginner practitioner, who relates how she started on the path of chod through music, similar to Chopa Diane. The chants that we hear are from the beginning of the sadhana, sang by Chopa Tenzin, and are those that Griva and Diane felt 'lured in' by. Griva offers the audience initial insights into what chod is as well as her motivations and the benefits she gains by practicing. The next interviews provide a summary of the orthodoxy of the practice and

Yeshe's first encounters with chod. As the narrative unfolds, the complexity of my informants' experiences develops, up to the point where Chopa Tenzin relates how one should see reality as an illusion and then deconstruct it to reach the ultimate goal of emptiness. For Tenzin, emptiness becomes an ontological position and one that should be adopted in the process of making the film to make his experience of chod relatable. Yet what does an ontology of emptiness entail?

## **2.1 Ontologies of emptiness and film**

To move on to a discussion of ontologies of emptiness, I would like to first highlight that Buddhist themed films predominantly follow two directions: the use of film to interpret Buddhism and the use of Buddhism to understand film (W. Blizek, 2009; W. Blizek & Desmarais, 2008). Masuzawa (2005) points out that these positions are a fundamental methodological issue in the study of Buddhism and religion more generally. However, if film is used to interpret or explain Buddhism, researchers may run the risk of either falling into reductionism or essentialism (Verchery, 2014). While the use of film for understanding Buddhism is more accepted in religious studies on the conditions that one selects films with specific Buddhist themes, this approach is considered by Verchery (2014, p. 3) to reinforce epistemological realism, because it asks if 'Buddhism in a film reflects aspects of Buddhism in the world'. In an attempt to move beyond this debate, Verchery, following Cavell, suggests that one should adopt an ontological position through which film has the function to show what lies beyond representation. According to Verchery, ontologies of emptiness must be studied via other cinematic forms, such as mise-en-scene, sound design or editing. Ontologies

of emptiness steer films on Buddhism away from reductionism, and they propose a hermeneutical analysis of seeing what is not there, a move beyond the visible (Verchery, 2014, p. 147). Thus, ontologies of emptiness combine Buddhist notions of emptiness and the study of knowledge by researching into our existing knowledge and abstracting it to make visible what we do not know. This process is demonstrated with the aim of provoking an experience that moves beyond what is represented in the film. One other way that ontologies of emptiness may help us see behind the surface maybe by 'disrupting the straightforward relationship of signifier and signified' (ibid, p 148), and aiding the viewer in removing the surface meanings that are embedded in images and sound.

Looking behind the surface by removing surface meaning in ethnographic research creates a paradox. On the one hand, ethnography is built on detail, context and closely observed analysis of the way experience unfolds. On the other hand, to reach an experience beyond representation requires a detachment from detail and context, to move beyond conceptualisation – an experience which Tenzin describes in his understanding of reality. Is there a way for film to address this paradox successfully? To answer this question, I turn to two films that successfully use observed detail so as to move beyond surface meaning: *Forest of Bliss* (1986) by Robert Gardner and *Into Great Silence* (2005) by Philip Gröning.

For some anthropologists, *Forest of Bliss* is a controversial documentary, as it seeks to immerse the audience in day-to-day life in the city of Varanasi, with an emphasis on death and grief rituals, without any obvious explanation or narration. The city of Varanasi is famous

for its high number of hospices, open cremations on the banks of the Ganges, and for the Hindu belief that those who die in Varanasi will not re-enter the circle of samsara and reincarnate. Henley (2020, p. 265), in an essay on Gardner's choice of images and juxtapositions, argues that 'one should be constantly reading them [images] as signifiers of some more transcendent meaning, even while bearing in mind that these images may be burdened with a phenomenal surface meaning that acts as an obstacle to grasping their true ulterior significance'. In other words, the film maker shows the audience certain images to help move them beyond the image into the realm of transcendence. Gardner guides the audience to envision an experience beyond representation through 'intellectual montage', a method of editing that comprises 'stylistically realist shots, often of relatively long duration ... applied to whole sequences based on a progressive, normal chronology that are intercut in the manner of parallel editing' (ibid). One famous and controversial example is the beginning sequence where the audience witnesses a dog fight and a dog is eaten alive by other dogs on the banks of the Ganges. The violence in the scene is provocative and may induce feelings of pity or rage on the part of the audience towards the director for exploiting emotions. The scene sets the mood for an exploration of death and impermanence as aspects of life that cannot be avoided. The lack of dialogue and explanations in the film relates to Verchery's (2014) notion of ontologies of emptiness through the approach of showing nothing to show everything. Verchery describes this approach as one where language is used to move beyond language, to push the audience to a space where they start to deconstruct the image and language, moving beyond representation and starting to experience the film in a different way.



Other examples here may be the film *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971) by Stan Brakhage, a silent film where a human body is dismantled in an autopsy until all elements that make it look human are removed and the audience is invited to question ideas of the self. A further example given by Verchery is the *Mahasatipatthna Sutta*, where a monk meditates on the components of the body, deconstructing it to the point where the body is only an amalgamation of substances, to 'cultivate detachment from the body as a meaningful entity' (ibid, p 152). In all of the above examples, the use of images pushes one to consider the surface meaning of the image and move beyond it, an approach that I cultivate in my own film.

Verchery's approach 'showing nothing by showing everything' is also present in the film *Into Great Silence* (2005) by Philip Gröning. This observational film documents the lives of the monks at Grand Chartreuse Charterhouse in France, who communicate with each other non-verbally. The main question asked in the film is how life unfolds without words. The film, a reflection on the theme of duration, is a meditation on space, time, and the relationship between the human and the divine. The 'acts of silence' portrayed by the filmmaker shape the film towards becoming a means for achieving a meditative state. In Gröning's words, he intended to create not a documentary but a 'meditation in which the architectonic accumulation of shots would become a monastery rather than depict one' (Paul Arthur, 2007, p. 71). The audience is invited to view nonverbal narrative for two and a half hours, through a window into religious experience made visible by the careful reflection of details and acts of repetition. Through a particular use of montage, the director guides the audience to shift their attention towards events that may otherwise be disregarded, like the slow melting of

snow or the positions of bodies during long prayers. Montage here works as a creator of visual routine as 'scenic transitions, as well as cuts between individual shots, are governed mainly by a firm set of oppositions: still/moving, light/dark, silence/sound, work/prayer, interior/exterior' (ibid). The lack of non-verbal sounds and the slow rhythm of the film invites the audience to slow down the act of watching and to engage with the film in a manner similar to the act of observing still images, moving their attention into a contemplative space.

In the film's approach to 'silence', there is a direct correlation to the ways Buddhism uses the concept of absence, not in the sense of showing a lack of something, but through making absence tangibly present. Cho argues that 'absence must be signified in order to be stereologically effective' (2008, p. 184). In Buddhist philosophy as well as art, the act of making silence observable is often used. Examples of this are images of empty thrones surrounded by disciples, or the representation of the Buddha as a horse with no rider. Verchery (2014, p. 148) argues that 'absences make that which is not present conspicuously absent', meaning 'ontologically present absences'. The lack of words in the film, apart from a short scene towards the end, furthers the act of making absence present, in the sense that it allows the audience to question the very nature of language itself and the meanings associated with creating meaning through signification, or as Long puts it: 'without words there can be no silence, yet the sheer absence of words is not silence. Silence forces us to realize that our words, the units of our naming and recognition in the world, presuppose a reality which is prior to our naming and doing' (Long 1986, 60, in Verchery, ibid). The question worth asking in this context is if the shift in attention from acts of presence to acts of absence is sufficient to move us beyond the compulsions of the image. The way in which both the

Forest of Bliss and Into Great Silence move the audience away from surface meaning is by showing the arbitrariness and the limits that lie beyond signification. Yet it is not sufficient to simply point out this relationship. In the film I aim to lead the audience towards a space for unlearning, which, as Chopa Tenzin suggested to me, is a place beyond conceptualisation. This is a path that is rooted in the tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as well as Hinduism. Tantra, as a practice, introduces the practitioner to a world that lies at the edge of discourse and representation. The act of representing tantric practices should engage methods that go beyond discourse and methods that transcend form and the non-representational. In the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, images and chants were not simply made to be seen and read aloud, but as a guide to experience. As forms, they are a means to an end rather than ends in themselves (the end being the act of reaching a state of emptiness or *tongpa nyi*). In this context, in capturing certain images and sounds through filmmaking, I sought to provide the viewer with an experience that transcends image and sound: an experience that moves beyond filmic representation. An example of this attempt can be found towards the end of the film, where I present Chopa Tenzin's views on chod and the illusory nature of reality. Here, by the use of experimental editing techniques such as the double screen – where Chopa Tenzin is portrayed talking to himself from two perspectives (a representation of double vision), I push the viewer to question the filmic illusion they have in front of their eyes and move away from the surface meaning of a singular reality, in the same way Tenzin talks about the illusory nature of reality from his experience. In the scene he engages in the linguistic practice of naming objects, such as the wall and the materials it is built of, and highlights how people do not question the meaning associated with objects to realise that reality is empty of meaning, an illusion.

## **2.2 Ontologies of emptiness in practice**

The ontological position of emptiness in the film is embedded in the process of learning chod from my informants, from self-study, and from learning through the camera. As stated in the previous chapters, in order to move to a non-conceptual practice, one needs to unlearn what one has learnt. I will explain this using examples from the film.

One of the main focuses of my research was on the processes of visualisations, as detailed in chapter 4. Learning to visualise is a complex practice that usually takes years to master. In the film, I focus on visualisations practices through the experience of Diane. After a year in Boudhanath, my visualisation skills were still at a beginner's stage. My ability to hold an image in my mind was tenuous. I would often lose hold of the image, in a manner similar to a film screen turning blank. My experience was the same as that of Diane and Griva, who also struggled to keep an image still in their minds for a long period of time. During our conversations, Diane related to me that while keeping the visualisation in her mind and copying the image of the deity is important, for her it is more important to acknowledge the elements of experience that are gained from visualising and the aspects of the self that she addresses in the process. The question that came to my mind in this instance was how to address the topic of visualisations in the film, and not only in terms of the discussion around how to visualise, but in terms of pointing towards the non-representational, experiential aspects of visualisations, specifically the aspects that develop in the mind and are only available to the practitioner. Ontologies of emptiness in this instance are about showing nothing by showing no thing (Verchery, 2014). Showing nothing by showing no thing is

described as 'showing emptiness through a deliberate and calculated showing of absence (no thing); in this way absence is depicted as a positive presence; that is as emptiness' (ibid, p 149).

One example of this practice in Buddhist themed films is *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (1989), a film on the theme of interconnectedness 'about the transformation of one event, object, person into another in a regenerative chain of causality' (Ehrlich, 1994, p. 27). The film follows the story of an orphan child, a young monk, and a Zen master; the main question asked in the film is *Why have we all left the world?*. In one of the scenes, Haejin, a young boy, falls into a pool. Once he stops panicking (he is unable to swim), Haejin stops his chaotic struggle and learns that if he remains still, he is able to float. This scene brings into discussion the Buddhist principle of non attachment; once Haejin is able to detach from the possibility of death he is free and death no longer controls him. Apart from the philosophical underpinning of the scene, the way it is shot brings into discussion ontologies of emptiness. Once Haejin stands still, we observe him floating at the top of the frame, followed by a shot of the sky reflecting into the water, giving the impression that he is not floating but flying, 'through a kind of ether that is not water and not sky' (Verchery, 2014, p. 150). With no linguistic narrative, the scene points towards a new understanding of life and death in Haejin's personal development. Verchery argues here that 'the emptiness of the frame creates an overdetermination of meaning' (ibid). The director creates meaning here by signifying in the frame much more than the surface meaning of the image. The film also brings into discussion the chain of causality that is a motif in Tibetan Buddhism, from the way karma is understood to the way practices and rituals, like chod, follow a specific narrative of causality. The film,

Chod: A Journey into Cutting the Self, involves the journey as a way of thinking about the chain of causality. In the film, the chain of causality begins in the cremation ground and ends at the cremation ground, as a way of moving meaning, beyond representation, into a non-representational space. Sound and images in this case are linked together with experiences, and develop and mirror the way the chain of causality unfolds in chod, through my informants' and my own perspectives.

I employ this type of construction in the visualisation scene I mentioned above. In this instance, I aimed at combining Diane's experience, represented through an audio recording, with images of tanka paintings and instances of emptiness in the sense described above. Diane presents the different ways she learnt to visualise the cutting of the body section of the sadhana and offers instructions on how she does this. The images in this scene start with a depiction of the Krodikali thangkas which are used by the practitioners in group practices. I follow this with images of the process of painting a thangka, from the moment it is sketched on the canvas to the full colour painting with all the details. The images are juxtaposed with shots of a burning butter lamp shot in slow motion in a dark room by the stupa. The burning lamp is slowed down in this context to slow down the narrative and to situate the viewer in a moment of introspection. The purpose of this is to invite the viewer to slow down and be absorbed by the information Diane provides, as well as to leave space for individual viewer experience. The candle scenes are combined with blank screen segments, similar to my experience of visualising, where images would appear and disappear. Much like the scene with the little monk Heijin described above, the 'emptiness' of the screen in this context aims to create meaning by moving the viewer away from the meaning of the surface image.

### **3. Personal perceptions**

Before moving onto an analysis of how I constructed the film with the idea of looking beyond representation, an overview of my involvement with chod is required to untangle how my personal experience of filming and learning the practice influenced the film. In this section I continue to engage with a series of documentaries and films that have influenced my approach and open the discussion to reflect on the editing process that will be detailed later in the chapter.

As mentioned previously in chapter 4, I decided to start filming three months into my fieldwork. I was keen to learn the practice of chod and to surrender my senses to the landscape of Boudhanath in all its complexities. Once I took my camera out of the bag and started to film, my process of learning chod developed as I was suddenly considering elements that I had not paid attention to before, such as the fashioning of practitioners' bodies or the perspective that sitting on the floor brought to framing images. Alongside this, I started to consider the processes behind the elements that constitute the practice of chod in greater depth. For example, the process of filming the damaru and the kangling workshops made me aware of the complexities of the sound of the two instruments and this prompted further investigation into the sound of chod and Boudhanath more generally, as described in chapter 5. The three months of fieldwork I conducted in the thanka school made me aware of the processes behind colour choices, framing and structuring the canvas, the techniques used for applying colours, and the mental attitude that the painter is required to have while painting. I applied aspects of this in the film, by adjusting its colour palette to the Tibetan painting

colour palette though colour correction editing, as I mentioned above I considered the structure of the film through the metaphor of the wheel, and I engaged in the whole practice of filmmaking adopting the view that my work should be for the benefit of all sentient beings and that I should always have in mind the values of Krodikali deity, the main deity of the practice.

By immersing myself in the field and by engaging in intersubjective relations with my informants, I also developed differently as a person. Fieldwork had a profound impact on my perception of the world, especially the Buddhist philosophy and way of life I encountered and experienced. The awareness of the illusory and impermanent nature of reality are some of the principles I hold close to my heart and that I included throughout the film. One way I showed this was by placing the focus on Chopa Tenzin and trying to communicate his way of experiencing the nature of reality and impermanence. For me, the scenes in the cremation ground towards the end are the most important, and ones that I gave a lot of thought to. Further, I believe the editing of the film to be similar to the cutting of the self-section of chod, where one slowly cuts attachments to negative emotions. Learning chod aided me in becoming aware of the aspects that I hold attachments to and that required cutting. It also made me aware of my privileged position as a white man from Europe and the mindset that came with it. Chod and Buddhism made me kinder and more compassionate to those around me. Another important element that impacted me was my attention towards the sound of the environment. I used to walk around different streets of Boudhanath and beyond to simply pay attention to how sound changes and echoes between streets, and to pay attention to how I interact with sound and the ways it affected me. All these embodiments were



incorporated into the way I approached the editing of the film, making the editing process a place for reflection and meditation, a topic I return to later on.

#### **4. Filming the invisible**

The ability of cinema to move beyond representation and to 'signify non-referentially' (Flitterman-Lewis, 1996, p. 110), as well as to create new experiences, has been long debated. Artaud, a French surrealist artist, discussed the potential of film to move beyond the visible in his essay *Sorcery and Cinema* (1927), where he states that 'cinema seems to me to be made, above all else, to express things of the mind, the inner life of conciseness, not so much through the play of images as through something more imponderable which restores them to us with their matter intact, without intermediate forms, without representations' (1927, p. 104). How should one understand the invisible? One way to understand the invisible is through Merleau-Ponty (1964), for whom the invisible may be seen as the 'view from everywhere', as 'an infinite totality of vision' (Suhr & Willerslev, 2013, p. 3), a paradox. Further, he asserts that with every embodied perspective, there is an infinite number of possible unnamed perspectives that present themselves to us in an 'inaccessible totality' (ibid). In Merleau-Ponty's argument, he emphasises that to perceive the world, certain elements of the visible should remain in the realm of the invisible. Perception in this case is a relational act, where one cannot talk about perception through a single object but always in relation to something. I use Merleau-Ponty to engage with the notion of the invisible in two ways. First, I discuss the strategy of double vision, one employed by my informants to make

sense of what lies beyond what they see, as a move beyond representation. And second, I engage with montage as another tool that might help us achieve an experience beyond representation.

#### **4.1 Double vision, a film strategy for moving beyond representation**

In chapter 4, I engage with the chopas' abilities to make visible aspects of the self through double vision, which arises at the intersection of the environment and one's chod practice. I argued that self-reflexivity develops at the point where chopas become aware and see themselves seeing. I discussed how Chopa Tenzin saw a manifestation of a spirit in the cremation ground, how he became aware of the emotions that arose in him, and how he used double vision to cut attachments to the fear that he experienced. This self-reflexive act can be seen as a mode of becoming aware and addressing those invisible aspects of the self that become visible, while other aspects (those that remain invisible) grow. In the film, I deploy this strategy as the main method for expressing the visible-invisible relationship. While self-reflexivity is something that is rooted in self-consciousness, in the film I aim to guide the viewer to reach a point of self-reflexivity by becoming aware of their own seeing. A method associated with double vision is that of creating distance between seeing and seeing oneself seeing (Willerslev, 2009). In the film, I employ this method by creating distance for the audience to become aware of their act of seeing the film. I also create space for the audience to make connections and engage with the sensory elements of the film. For example, in the scene where Diane talks of visualisations and offers precise instruction on how she visualises, the image and the sound are broken into parts: in between her instructions I edit in a black screen or an abstract image of a fire burning. To refer back to Verchery's discussion on silence, here silence (in the sense of making what is not present noticeably absent) is an ontological

position that creates emptiness by highlighting what is not there. Thus, allowing space to immerse oneself into the discussion of visualisations and by providing glimpses of these visualisations in the mind of the viewer, the viewer is distanced from Diane's speech and the images present to centre in on an experience inside one's mind. Another scene where I employ double vision through sound, is the transitory scene between the landscape of Boudhanath and the monastery. The scene changes suddenly from the rich sonic landscape and busy environment around Boudhanath to quiet images of the monastery where the sound is barely noticeable, creating a shift in perception. During one of the screenings of the film, a member of the audience informed me that during this scene she held her breath and became aware of her own bodily sensations and did not want to disturb the 'silence' with her breath. In other words, she became aware of herself seeing and making sounds.

## **4.2 Montage and juxtapositions**

Montage is another technique used to highlight this dichotomy of the visible-invisible. Suhr and Willerslev (2013) argue that montage, through the disruptive juxtapositions of frames, is a mode of making one aware of the invisible perception that lies at the surface between object and subject. When two or more elements are brought together through montage, a surplus of knowledge and experience (invisible) is created alongside the relations (visible) shaped between frames or ideas. Eisenstein (1942) argues that we should not see the juxtaposition created through montage as a simple act of rendering two different dispersed pieces into a similar piece, but to aim for the 'classical Hegelian-Marxist dialectic of thesis-antithesis leading to synthesis' (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva in Suhr and Willerslev, 2013). As

mentioned in chapter 4, according to my informants, reaching a state of emptiness is not achieved by moving completely away from the way we perceive reality to some radical rupture, but by using the rules of reality to subvert it until it fully collapses, and emptiness emerges.

As previously mentioned, one example where I aimed to create an experience beyond visual representation is the cremation ground scene with Chopa Tenzin. Towards the end of the scene, we observe Tenzin engaging in a discussion of the forms (i.e. spirits) that appear in the cremation ground during his chod practice. The narrative develops and Tenzin argues that all we observe is an image created by our mind (mind print), an illusion created by our ignorance, and that we should cut attachments to it. While Tenzin tells his story, we watch him dancing in the cremation ground. During his discussion of spirits and manifestations, we see two images of Tenzin on a split screen facing each other. Here Tenzin looks like he is talking to himself about the manifestations he witnesses and on top of this, in the middle of the screen faded in the background, we observe Tenzin dwelling in the cremation ground. Tenzin's explanations of his experience become more abstract, and his rendering of reality develops into an explanation that may not be accessible to someone not trained in chod or a novice practitioner. I employ the ontological position of 'showing nothing by showing everything' (using language to move beyond language) to create a place for the viewer to contemplate Tenzin's understanding of reality. Here I aim to convey that there is no tangible reality to grasp in the filmic image and sound, and the amalgamation of substances and images slowly dissolves. Next, I bring the audience back to a final narrative by Tenzin, where his discourse becomes even more abstract. The final scene is composed of the keeper of the stupa, who walks with a bucket of incense purifying the stupa and reciting mantras at dawn. The images

in the scene follow a juxtaposition of the same footage on three temporal lines. I juxtapose the main sequence at 70% opacity with a 0.50 second delay of the same sequence at 30% opacity, and again with the same sequence, but this time with a 0.50 second fast forward at 30% opacity. The scene creates the sensation of time moving in three directions: the past, the present and the future.

## **5. Editing as a reflection of cutting the self**

So far, I have argued that filmmaking may offer insights into chod practice not available by other means. Andy Lawrence, in the context of making *The Lover and The Beloved* and *The One and The Many*, claims that his tantric agori informants ‘purposely invert meaning to experiment with perceived order and authority’ (2020, p. 126). Lawrence suggests that when editing footage, one should follow the tantric path of disruption by employing experimentation and non-attachment. Following this, I argue that the process of editing an ethnographic film on the subject of chod should be analogous to the path of cutting the self.

I suggest that the practice of visualising may then be aligned with the practice of editing. In the visualisations of the cutting of the body, the practitioner combines images that were mimetically copied, such as the image of the deity or one’s self-image, with images created by the mind, such as the body feast, where beings from all realms come and feed on the body. In this instance, all my informants reported that images are intermittent, and they often fade in and out. One of the ways attachments are cut from the self, or made visible, is in the juxtaposition of certain elements in the visualisations, such as inviting the guests to eat out

of one's body what they desire. On another level, the cutting of the self is also enriched by adopting the image of the deity in the form of a rainbow body that is composed of light. In this case, by merging the visualisation of the image of the deity to the image of one's own consciousness, the practitioner becomes aware of the perfect qualities of the deity and of the qualities that one does not possess yet and strives to achieve. In my own case, I became aware of the qualities I needed to improve when I juxtaposed the image of the deity with the qualities that it embodies (i.e., perfect compassion) in my own consciousness. Therefore, we can understand the act of cutting the self as a form of editing, which aims at moving one away from the attachments one has to the self as well as allowing one to take a deeper look inside one's self.

## **5.1 Sound design**

For the sound editing and mixing of the film, I used the sound recorded in the camera and by the sound recorder. This multi-layered approach allowed me to construct a sound ecology for the film based on the soundscape of my fieldwork. I often added layers of sound to enhance the recordings picked up by the microphone connected to the camera. Each time I recorded sound on camera I also recorded it on my sound recorder, and often combined the two. At times, I enhanced specific sounds, like the sound of the kangling in the final scene, to make it stand out in the film.

## 5.2 Deep listening

The sound design of the film may have been the most challenging part of the editing process. The limitations of my recording equipment meant that I was only able to record stereo sound, and this was often complicated by the fact that I had to divide my attention between filming and sound recording. As mentioned in chapter 5, during fieldwork I engaged in practices of what I have come to understand as 'deep listening', be it in my room, in the surroundings of Boudhanath or the monastery setting. I often found myself listening to my sound recordings and finding new sounds or relations between sounds that I had not noticed before. Pauline Oliveros, an influential artist and philosopher in the realm of avant-garde, electronic and experimental music, coined the concept of deep listening. In her work, Oliveros emphasises the difference between hearing and listening, where hearing is the physical act of perceiving sound vibrations while listening is a subjective experience where attention is placed on what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically. During a talk on her life work on the subject, Oliveros explained deep listening as follows:

'So what is deep listening? Acoustic space is where time and space merge as they are articulated by sound, deep has to do with complexities, a subject that is too deep surpasses one's understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily. Deep listening is learning to expand the perception of sound to include the whole space-time continuum of sound and countering the vastness and complexities as much as possible. Simultaneously, one should be able to target a sound or sequence of sounds perceiving the beginning, middle and end of them as a focus. Such focus means that one is connected to the whole environment and beyond' (Oliveros, 2015).

Following Oliveros' description, deep listening is a learnt practice, one that may last a lifetime or beyond to master. While I may not be able to create an experience of deep listening simply through my editing of the film, it was certainly part of the way that I interacted with and perceived the environment and practices of Chod while making the film. Alongside the act of profoundly connecting to the sound environment and expanding one's acoustic horizon, I would like the audience to focus on particular sounds and to follow them through the film as exemplified above.

Before watching the film, I invite the viewer to take five minutes to practice deep listening. Take a few deep breaths and pay attention to the sounds around you. Do not engage with them, simply listen. With each breath seek to expand your acoustic horizon and see how far you may be able to listen. After two minutes, start identifying sounds that you perceive as moving. For example, cars on the street or people walking around. Pay attention to the moment you become aware of these sounds and follow the sound through its movement until cannot hear it anymore. Pay attention to your sound environment without this sound and then start again by focusing on a different sound. For the last minute of this exercise, seek to connect to your sound environment further by expanding your sound horizon, beyond your immediate sound environment. What do you notice? Are there any sounds you did not notice in the first place? How does this exercise feel in your body? I would like you to practice deep listening throughout the film.



I would like to point out a few scenes where I invite you to follow certain sounds. In the title sequence, pay attention to the way the first chod chant develops and how it is accompanied by the instruments. Listen to the voice of Chopa Tenzin and the rhythm of his chants. Pay attention to the bell and the drum, by following their sounds from beginning to end. What difference does it make to the chant when the bell and drum are played? What about the end sequence when the chanting stops and the instruments keep playing? Once the chanting and the instruments stop, pay attention to the sounds in the environment of the cremation ground. The next sequence is rich in sounds and encompasses a variety of sound dynamics. Pay attention to how the sound moves in the speakers as you slowly walk inside the stupa area. What sounds do you identify? How does the soundscape change from the busy road to the inside of the monastery? Throughout the film, I would like you to pay attention to the sounds of the chod instruments, both in the group practice and in individual settings. How does the sound of these instruments make you feel in these different settings? Finally, at the end, where we come back to Chopa Tenzin's practice, I would like to invite you to focus on the sounds of the kangling. How does the sound of the kangling feel in your body? How does it combine with the rest of the sounds? Pay attention to what you hear after the sound of the kangling. In the last part of the film, simply let yourself be guided by the sound by again engaging in the practice of expanding your sonic horizon. Do not follow any specific sound, simply listen and expand your awareness of the sounds present in the film as well as how they make you feel. Once the film has finished, return to the deep listening practice you did at the beginning and engage in another 5 minutes of deep listening to your surrounding environment. Did anything change?

## 6. Conclusion

One of the challenges with Tibetan Buddhist practices such as chod is that they require a complex level of experiential engagement from the practitioner, making it hard to understand the practice from a distance. Amongst all possible ways of engaging in and studying the experience of chod, here I have argued that film can be a beneficial mode of engaging with chod on an experiential level. The film, through its appeal to ways of seeing and hearing, as well as through the practice of montage, may aid the audience to transcend the limits of image and language, and help them to experience the practice of chod (or emptiness to some extent) beyond conceptualisation, beyond representation. With my film I seek to locate the audience in the context of Boudhanath, while also visually highlighting some of the changes in the landscape of Boudhanath detailed in chapter 3 and exploring the entwinement of the tourist-dharma-based economy and the practice of Buddhism. Moreover, the sonic landscapes of the stupa, the chod centres and the cremation grounds are employed in the film to advance the experience of emplacement and to direct the audience towards an experience of being in Boudhanath. Images and sounds in the Tibetan tradition were not solely made to be looked at or listened to, but to be immersed in on a deep experiential level. Through montage, the film aims to highlight the visible-invisible and the representational-non-representational dichotomies and guide the audience on a journey to transcend language and form.

# Conclusion

In this thesis I have addressed the question: What is the nature of the religious experience of chod? I did this through immersion in the life of the Boudhanath area and by carrying out fieldwork, using a filmmaking practice to look at the different faces of the ritual practice of chod. I have examined the images produced for the practice, how they are used by practitioners, as well as how chopas are affected by images. I have studied the way sound is produced through the instruments of chod, and how chanting and music moves practitioners, offering support for meditation and visualisations. I also analysed how chod has changed over time and how the increasing popularity of the practice has affected the economy of Boudhanath. Lastly, I presented a film to show how the study of images and sounds can be accomplished through making images and sounds. Due to the nature of the religious experience of chod, I considered the need for another medium of experience – one that pushes the limits of representation as defined by chod. The film helped me to contextualise the ritual of chod and it offers the audience a glimpse into what chod looks, sounds and feels like. The religious experience of chod is dynamic and involves a broad range of sensory faculties. At heart, chod takes images and sounds and uses them to direct the practitioner to look inside the self. Through this introspection, the chopas become aware of elements of the self that they might want to cut, up to the point of reaching a state of no self, or emptiness. The relationship the chopas have with the images and sounds of the practice differs from person to person and it depends on their level of practice (beginner, experienced or advanced). At a beginner's level, one may become aware of the various attachments a chopas has and one

may start an introspective journey to understand them, while at a higher level of practice, a chopa may seek to move beyond logic and to learn to unlearn.

The experience of chod encompasses every aspect of life so that while this thesis has touched on ideas and debates in the anthropology of religion, visual anthropology, anthropology of Buddhism and the anthropology of Nepal. themes that remain to be explored, including materiality, gender, Buddhist politics, space and place and migration. All of these themes cropped up throughout my fieldwork, but for a variety of reasons, such as insufficient data, the specificity of my focus, and preference for certain topics they remain unexplored. I suggest these areas could provide fruitful avenues for further research.

In chapter 1 and 2, I introduced the practice of chod, the Boudhanath area, and my main informants. I then provided an overview of the historical development of chod and moved towards a theoretical discussion on the ways of seeing in Tibetan Buddhism, sensory practices, agency and the gift of the body, the body offering and ritual economies. These conversations set the stage for the material in chapter 3, where I engaged in an analysis of the ritual economy of chod as well as an introduction to the karmic economy, the production, distribution and agency of ritual objects and the creation of new monastics spaces. I demonstrated how the recent increase in the popularity of chod has also become an economic opportunity for local craftsmen to produce and sell chod ritual objects. These objects, such as the kangling, damaru or thangkas, are not only embedded in the ritual

economy of chod and the local economy but also in a karmic economy, whereby producing and selling these artefacts affects one's future reincarnations.

In chapter 4, I focused on the production and use of images, such as thangkas, in visualisations and film. I started the chapter by engaging with the language of seeing and the way skilled vision is developed in the practice of chod. I further engaged with the mimetic act of copying an image into the mind's eye, and then moved towards a discussion of double vision – a particular way of seeing that allows the chopas to become aware of their attachments and cut them. The core of the chapter focused on the way chopas learn to see in practice through visualisations, and in the way they address their attachments through visualisations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of seeing through the camera and montage as a mode of addressing the invisible to reach an experience that moves beyond the limits of representation defined by chod.

In chapter 5, I shifted my attention from ways of seeing to ways of knowing through sound. I grounded my understanding of the sound of chod in the rasa theory of aesthetics to highlight how the music of chod was created with a specific aesthetic effect in mind. Further, I analysed the music of chod as part of the sonic landscape of Boudhanath, which not only affects the practice of chod but also structures the ways locals make sense of space. Using the concept of sonic atmospheres, I argued that the religious experience of Buddhist practitioners, especially the chopas, is sonically influenced and shared: these are experiences that transcend the individuality of practitioners and give rise to shared emotions and feelings. I employed

the concept of transduction to further understand how sound can be understood as a vibration that aids practices of individuation through the transfer of energy from materials (i.e., instruments) to the chopas and the wider environment. In the final section of the chapter, I examined how sound practices are taught by monastics to perpetuate the chod tradition. I demonstrated that aural teachings follow a methodical approach and rely on body modelling and practices of attunement to the teacher's body and instructions. All in all, the sonic elements of chod act as supports for visualisations and meditation.

In chapter 6, I moved my attention towards discussing the ways of seeing and hearing developed through the camera. I argued that film can be used as a medium to engage with the practice of chod and create an experience that moves beyond representation. On the one hand the film provides context and locates the audience; on the other hand, it uses images and sound to transcend the representational functions of images and sound. Through a discussion of editing, I highlighted the visible-invisible dichotomies and take the audience on a journey to transcend language and form.

# Epilogue

Three years after I return from Nepal in 2022, the popularity of chod continues to increase. The Covid-19 pandemic slowed this process due to lockdown measures, yet once the procedures to restrict the spread of the virus were reduced, the demand for chod saw a sharp increase. The Covid-19 pandemic had a big impact on the number of foreigners visiting Kathmandu or Boudhanath to study or meet with their lamas. However, foreigners kept seeking lessons online and some of the lamas, such as Tenzin and Yeshe, adapted to these new methods. This would be an interesting line of future research. The pandemic isolated Nepal from the world as well as from one of its main sources of economic development – tourism. Even if demand for chod instruments increased outside Nepal, the lack of cargo transport during the long lockdowns did not allow for much commerce. Local businesses were heavily impacted by the lack of foreign customers, and many had to shut temporarily or shift their attention to local customers rather than foreigners.

Khenpo Yeshe continued in his endeavour to teach foreigners online, and he started giving lessons and classes to Europeans and Americans on Zoom. Yeshe's previous experience of teaching me and another Western student before me came in handy, and his online classes were well-attended (30-50 students). He offered online empowerments, taught meditation classes, tantric practices and conducted online pujas. Alongside this, Yeshe started to build his own Buddhist temple outside Kathmandu. He also opened a centre in Hanoi, Vietnam. Tenzin opened his own chod centre in the Boudhanath area. The centre is open to anyone

interested in learning chod. He organises classes online and in person, and retreats to cremation grounds around Nepal and India. Most of his students now are from Europe or the US.

Khenpo has recently begun a relationship with the village of Thulopatal, Nepal, where he will offer guidance as their primary lama. Furthermore, at the request of his Nepali students, Khenpo has begun preliminary plans to build a small monastery in Kathmandu. When he's not teaching, Khenpo translates precious sadhanas and prayers from the Dudjom Tersar tradition into English for his students. Khenpo is also a consultant for the Khyentse Vision Project, headed by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, which is translating the complete works of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. Whether he is with monastics, lay practitioners, or scholars, Khenpo works tirelessly with the pure intention of preserving authentic Tibetan Buddhist traditions and spreading the Buddhadharma teachings of compassion and wisdom.

I expect the practice of chod to increase in popularity over the next years, and I wonder in what ways the experience of being taught online differs from that of learning chod in person. I wonder in what ways the instructions Yeshe or Tenzin offered to their students online shaped their practice of chod, and how they made up for their lack of instruments or thangka paintings. I am curious about how the dynamics of learning chod as a group online are different to learning chod as a group in person, especially in terms of learning to chant, and the importance of sonic atmospheres and group dynamics. I would also like to know how visualisations in this new online environment work and how they affect the practitioners and their surroundings. These recent changes point to the ongoing resilience and development of



the practice, suggesting that ultimately the religious experience of chod is a dynamic process that invites further investigation and analysis.

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