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# Churning the Ocean of Milk: The Role of Vocal Composition in Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Music

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# Churning the Ocean of Milk

## The Role of Vocal Composition in Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Music



Figure 1. "Butter Lamp Offering"

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Music, Philosophy

Asia, India, Himachal Pradesh

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## **Abstract**

*“...These songs should be regarded as the best of the butter which has been churned from the ocean of milk of the Buddha’s teachings.”<sup>1</sup>*

Ritual music is a significant but often misunderstood aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. Specifically, vocal music serves a variety of purposes that distinguish the genre from Western music. In order to understand and appreciate ritual vocal music from a Western perspective, there must be firm understanding of the importance of melody and the source of its value. The author has studied with members of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community, focusing on ritual vocal music and the process of composition. Through an examination of the vocal music composition and of concepts of inspiration and creativity, this paper will shed light on the crucial role of the composer and the process of composing in Tibetan Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> Chöyam Trungpa Rinpoche, foreword to *The Rain of Wisdom*, translated by Nalanda Translation Committee, (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1980), xiii.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Finally, I cannot fully express my love and devotion to my family. Thank you, Mom and Dad – without you, I would and could never have attempted such a rewarding and challenging journey. Thank you to my sister, Tanya, who is a tremendous individual and beyond what anyone could ask for in a sibling and friend.

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## Introduction

Like much of traditional Tibetan culture, the unique sounds of Tibetan Buddhist ritual music are shrouded in mystery. The cacophonous ensemble of horns and cymbals, and the incomprehensible drone of chanting, combines to produce an otherworldly genre unlike anything in Western music. To the untrained ear, much of the musical, cultural, and religious significance is lost.

Music plays a vital role in the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition. Much of a monk's practice consists of learning and reciting prayers. Melodic chanting is seen as an effective tool for accomplishing the goals of these prayers – mainly, to pray to and appease various deities, and to cultivate compassion and peacefulness through meditation. The prayers themselves contain important teachings, preserved throughout the many generations of each Buddhist lineage or tradition: “Within the Tibetan tradition, the definition of Buddhism is lineage. If there is no lineage, there is no Buddhism.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the ancient founders of the four Tibetan Buddhist schools, practitioners have preserved and delivered their wisdom from teacher to student.<sup>3</sup> Monastic chant melodies serve as an accessible means of practicing, internalizing, and teaching this knowledge to new generations.

The melodies are independently important as well, composed by the realized masters of Tibetan Buddhism. These lamas (singular: *bla-ma*) wrote melodies for a number of purposes – as an offering to a deity, as an accompaniment to an instructional

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<sup>2</sup> Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 75.

<sup>3</sup> There are four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism – Nyingma (*rnying-ma*), Gelug (*dge-lugs*), Kagyu (*bka'-brgud*), and Sakya (*sa-brkya*). They are less exclusive sects as much as distinct traditions.

or devotional poem, and even as a spontaneous creation of artistic expression.<sup>4</sup> While contemporary monastic vocal repertoires consist of many ancient melodies, lamas in each generation have put forth new compositions. In fact, the practice of musical composition is in itself a significant part of Tibetan Buddhism, and a key to understanding its ritual music from a Western perspective.

This paper will explore concepts of inspiration and creativity in the context of ritual melody composition. Such topics demand a brief introduction to ritual music. A following examination of the composers and the process of composition will help to define the significance of the vocal music in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Additionally, an understanding of composition will shed light on more subtle contrasts between Tibetan Buddhist and Western music.

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<sup>4</sup> Selected Tibetan terms and names will be referred to by their phonetic spelling, with the Tibetan transliteration in parentheses the first time only. For information about transliterations, see Appendix A.



## Music as a part of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition

Music is an essential part of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life. It spans from large group rituals ([singular] Sanskrit: puja; Tibetan: chöpa [*mchod-pa*]) with combinations of instruments and chanting, to individual meditation and recitation of prayers. Every monastery has a slightly different repertoire that its monks are required to learn. However, instrumental and vocal music make up a considerable part of every Tibetan Buddhist monk's education and practice.

Pujas – group offerings that involve chanting and performing music (among other oblations like bowing and presenting offerings like water and incense) for a specific deity – take up a great deal of monastic practice. These rituals vary in musical style, purpose, and frequency of performance depending on the relevant deity and the occasion. One of the most common rituals, the Invitation of Mahakala is performed for one hour every morning and evening.<sup>5</sup> Other pujas may be performed on special occasions in accordance with the Tibetan calendar.

Pujas serve several functions. In one sense, they honor deities and ask for their blessings and protection. The Invitation of Mahakala, for example, is designed to specifically appease Mahakala. Because he is known as a particularly fierce god, the music is also “fierce”, with more volume and frequency of horns and percussion<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, a prayer for a more peaceful deity like Tara demands a lighter sound with

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<sup>5</sup> [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Nagpo Chenpo [*gnag-po chen-po*]), an important protector and wrathful deity in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Egyed, “Theory and Practice of Music in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Tradition” (PhD. diss., University of Washington, 2000), 64.

higher pitch ranges and fluctuation.<sup>7</sup> In appeasing a deity with the appropriate music, the puja is believed to accumulate merit and receive blessings from the deity.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2. Monks play two buha horns, unique to Tashi Jong Monastery in Himachal Pradesh, India**

Puja music also serves to aid its performers in mediation, specifically in the visualization of the deity. While playing and chanting, each monk focuses on a clear mental image of the god so that they even come to see themselves as that god. The chanting provides repetition of prayers and words to focus the mind, and the music creates a proper environment within which to visualize and embody the deity. In a sense, the object is to “get lost in the music,” as is a common perspective on Western music.

<sup>7</sup> [Sanskrit] Tibetan: (Drölma [*Sgrol-ma*]), a female deity of compassion.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of merit is an important part of Buddhist philosophy, in which one is later rewarded, in the present or future lifetime, for one’s positive actions.

However the monks do not, by any means, simply allow their minds to roam as they enjoy the beautiful sounds of the puja. Rather, they have a quite demanding task of mentally connecting with a god. So, puja music serves as an offering in two ways: first, as a direct gift to a deity; and second, as a vehicle through which participants can offer themselves to a deity in the form of meditation and visualization.

Pujas require a great deal of both mental and physical stamina. A monk must focus their mind for a long time, while continuing to recite a variety of prayers and melodies. Both the vocal and instrumental parts can be complex and require mere physical capacities to perform. Certain types of melodies occupy considerably low pitch ranges that challenge the voices of both younger and older generations. Several horns in the ensemble are played using circular breathing, which demands tremendous energy and endurance.<sup>9</sup> Though demanding, puja music teaches discipline and perseverance which are crucial to the practice of meditation and general Buddhist philosophy.

Several monks help direct the many musical performers in pujas. Every monastery has several umdzes ([singular] *dbu-mdzad*), or chant masters. These monks teach vocal and instrumental music and help to lead the group rituals. Umdzes are usually known for their superior voices, and must spend several years meticulously learning the liturgical repertoire of their monastery or lineage.<sup>10</sup> Kelsang Yeshe (*skal-bzang ye-shes*), known as Umdze Kale (*dbu-mdzad ka-le*), is one of the senior chant masters at Palpung Sherab Ling (*dpal-spungs shes-rab gling*) Monastery in the Himachal Pradesh region in northwest India. He currently has over eighty students, six of whom focus mainly on

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<sup>9</sup> A technique in which the player breaths in through the nose while simultaneously letting air out from the cheeks in order to sustain notes for extraordinary lengths of time.

<sup>10</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

chanting.<sup>11</sup> When asked about his schooling he said, “I was taught the melodies very strictly...It is the job of the umdze to keep the melodies alive in general, and to provide it exactly as taught during puja.”<sup>12</sup>

During puja, Umdze Kale performs the “lead” chant melody so that others can follow. During some difficult sections, monks may struggle to emulate the exact melody. However, there is no room for creativity in either the instrumental or vocal parts of the music: “No improvising allowed! The only time there is not unison is if a monk cannot sing it exactly as composed.”<sup>13</sup> In the West, musical improvisation is generally regarded as an art of demonstrating one’s virtuosity. However, there is no place for showing off in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music – it goes against Buddhist principles regarding the control of one’s ego and attachment. If the performer improvises and alters the music, he is focused on the literal sounds and his own musical skills. Rather, the music as written is intended to satisfy deities and provide an appropriate setting for meditation.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (22 November 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Understanding ritual vocal music

### *Repertoires and categorization*

Every monastery has its own repertoire of religious texts that its monks are required to learn, and many texts have multiple melodies and styles of chanting. Further, both texts and melodies may differ among the four Tibetan Buddhist schools, and between two monasteries in the same school. For example, a Kagyu monastery and a Sakya monastery may have different words and music for the same Mahakala ritual. More specifically, Sherab Ling and Rumtek (*rum-theg*) Monastery in Sikkim are both of the Karma Kagyu tradition, and they use the same text for a particular offering called Sashi Pöchu (*sa-gzhi spos-chu*).<sup>14</sup> However, Sherab Ling uses a melody composed by His Holiness the 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa, while Rumtek uses one composed by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa.<sup>15</sup> See “Audio Example 1” in Appendix B for another example of these differences.

The immense collection of chant vocalizations consists of a range of melodies with varying complexity and function. As Terry Jay Ellingson notes, the chants may be grouped according to function and activity – e.g. Invitation to Mahakala – but also according to melodic characteristics.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that many different Tibetan words can be used for the same musical terms. Due to the disparities between monastic

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<sup>14</sup> A large tradition within the Kagyu school. Its founder, the Gyalwa Karmapa (*rgya-wa rkarma-pa*), is an important incarnate lama – a realized being who consciously takes human rebirth to benefit others - and is the spiritual leader of the Kagyu school. The Karma Kagyu tradition has remained strong due to the unbroken succession of Karmapas since the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>15</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (1 December, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Ter Ellingson, “Don rta dbyangs gsum: Tibetan chant and melodic categories,” *Asian Music* X, no. 2 (Tibetan issue 1979): 112-16.

repertoires, the nature of the Tibetan language, and even the variation in dialects in native Tibetan regions, it is impossible to establish a set of universal ritual chant terms and classifications.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the names and labels, chant music can still be thought of as a loose hierarchy of melodic styles with a range of complexity and importance.



**Figure 3. "Umdze Kale"**

The most simple and least adorned type of melody is called *dön* (*'don*).<sup>18</sup> It is essentially the recitation of a chant, with very little melodic contour at a fast tempo. Similar to ordinary speech, *dön* rhythmically emphasizes significant syllables and the structure of the text.<sup>19</sup> *Dön* can be subdivided into two groups: *dönta* (*'don-rta*) and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Ter Ellingson, "Don rta dbyangs gsum: Tibetan chant and melodic categories," *Asian Music* X, no. 2 (Tibetan issue 1979): 121-2.

shrugdön (*hrug-'don*).<sup>20</sup> The former are slightly slower melodies with more of a distinguishable “melody” line, to use Western concepts, while the latter resemble the hasty rhythmic reading of a text.

The next type of melody, yang (*dbyangs*), is slower with a wider pitch range and more discernable “notes.”<sup>21</sup> Yang melodies involve fluctuations and fluid pitch rises that move in between Western pitch values.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the original melody will rise in repetition, similar to a transposition (the shifting of a melody to another key), except that the original interval proportions are not preserved.<sup>23</sup> Ellingson suggests, then, that yang be defined as a semi-discernable melody with a range of possible variation.

The third and most complex type of melody is called dang (*dgangs*).<sup>24</sup> Dang operate in the lowest pitch range and are incredibly slow – many syllables in the text are held for several seconds. At first, dang may seem monotonous and perhaps even unappealing. However, dang are so musically complex that they transcend Western concepts of melody. It would be inappropriate to define a dang as a sequence of pitches and intervals; rather, it consists of smooth, continuous vocal shapes.<sup>25</sup>

While all texts and melodies are important, there is a clear hierarchy among the different melodies.<sup>26</sup> Dang is indisputably the supreme type of melody and is reserved for

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<sup>20</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (1 December 2009).

<sup>21</sup> It is dangerous to use the term “notes” because Tibetan liturgical music does not use any Western system of pitch degrees and scales.

<sup>22</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Ter Ellingson, “Don rta dbyangs gsum: Tibetan chant and melodic categories,” *Asian Music X*, no. 2 (Tibetan issue 1979): 128-43.

<sup>24</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Ter Ellingson, “Don rta dbyangs gsum: Tibetan chant and melodic categories,” *Asian Music X*, no. 2 (Tibetan issue 1979): 144.

<sup>26</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

the most important sections of a text or ritual. Yang is also considered very beautiful and valuable, but is slightly more average in comparison with dang. Dön is used mainly for quick, repetitious sections of text and is considered to be the least valued type of melodic style. However, Umdze Kale emphasizes the fact that the terms dang, yang, and dön are broad categories: “Yes, yang melodies are similar and sound like this [*demonstrates*], and so on, but some yang are better quality than others. The word ‘yang’ is just another term that someone came up with...”<sup>27</sup> Ellingson agrees these three categories must be considered as loose divisions within a range of melodic structures so that, for example, a relatively complicated yang is comparable to a relatively simple dang.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Melody as preservation***

The education of ritual vocal music illustrates the general hierarchy of melody types. Vocal repertoires are taught orally or with notation, depending on the type of melody. Monks are required to memorize a certain group of yang and dön melodies. Umdzes will sing a melody once through, and their students will recite back what they can.<sup>29</sup> The umdzes then correct the mistakes, and the process continues until the students retain it.

Only dang melodies have written notation.<sup>30</sup> There are two main systems of notation: the first, used primarily by the Sakya and Gelug schools, in which lines protruding from the text syllables denote specific vocal actions; and the second, more

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Terry Jay Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 413-4

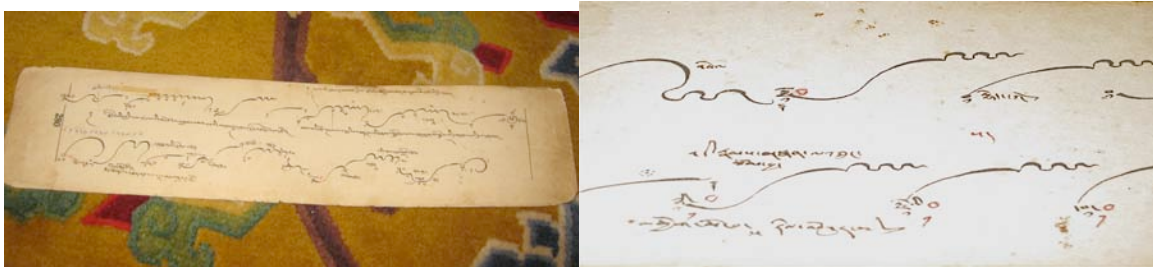
<sup>29</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



common among the Kagyu and Nyingma schools, in which curved lines and symbols move from left to right in correlation with the text. Ellingson writes that the latter notation is used to “pictorially represent required changes in the intonational contour.”<sup>31</sup>

The figures below depict this system of notation:



**Figure 4. "Mahakala puja pecha with dang notation"**

The figures above consist of one side of pecha (*dpe-cha*) – religious text - with dang notation used in the Mahakala puja at Sherab Ling. It is a particularly long puja; there are over one hundred double-sided pages like the one above.<sup>32</sup> In comparison, the puja for Guru Rinpoche contains sixty pages of similar dang notation, and the one for Cakrasamvara has only twenty pages.<sup>33</sup> Since pujas generally consist of musical sections with different vocal and instrumental arrangements, the pecha with dang notation only accounts for a portion of the ritual. All vocal sections with yang or dōn melodies are memorized.

Students learn to read dang with its notation, and the process is much more strict than that of yang and dōn memorization. As Umdze Kale recalls, umdzes especially must

<sup>31</sup> Terry Jay Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 272-6.

<sup>32</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (19 November 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Guru Rinpoche (Sanskrit: Padmasambhava; Tibetan: *gu-ru rin-po-che*) was an Indian tantric master who is credited with establishing Buddhism in Tibet in the 9th century. Cakrasamvara [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Korlo Demchog [‘*khor-lo bde-mchog*]) is an important meditational deity.

be taught dang with extreme precision: “With yang, you can maybe afford to make a mistake here and there, but I had to learn dang exactly as my teacher told me.”<sup>34</sup> When asked about this rigidity, he responded, “Dang melodies are so important because they preserve the lineage.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the emphasis on dang, however, all melodies are important to the preservation of lineage and tradition. Like the precious teachings of a lineage, umdzes have passed the melodies from teacher to student. In this way, the melodies carry more weight than simply accompanying the prayers; since they are preserved in their strict original form, the melodies have their own place in the importance of lineage.

### *Concepts of beauty and function*

Though it is important to understand the different types of melodies as loose categories, there is an undeniable hierarchy that designates some melodies as more aurally “beautiful” (Tibetan: nyenpa [*snyan-pa*]). When asked about several similar yang composed by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, Umdze Kale noted that he likes one of them in particular: “This one...[its pitch] goes up high then comes back down...but this other one does not flow as much...it stays closer to [one general pitch].”<sup>36</sup> Clearly there is room for personal taste and preference – it helps explain why monasteries in the same school use different melodies for the same texts and rituals. However, it is perhaps unclear as to why dang are considered to most beautiful. Moreover, why a hierarchy even exists at all; if dang are the best, why use yang or dön at all?

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (22 November 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (1 December 2009).

On a practical level, it is important and even necessary to use a variety of melodies. In one sense, yang and dōn save time; dang are so slow that if they were used for every chant, a monastery would never get through every prayer and have time for other activities. In fact, time may even be a factor in the use of repertoires and chant structures. As mentioned above, dōn conform to significant syllables and rhythm. Umdze Kale notes that yang sometimes works similarly: “Some [yang] will move slowly through one section because there are less words...then the melody will move quickly through another section that has more words.”<sup>37</sup> Time and flow are thus taken into account in the selection of melodies for text, and even in the composition of the melodies.

In another sense, dang require an incredible amount of endurance, skill, and sheer vocal capacity. Not everyone can sing dang melodies due to a combination of their complexity and low pitch range. Even the most talented and accomplished umdzes could not perform dang for every single prayer – they would be mentally and physically exhausted. Umdze Kale even points out that dang are perhaps too demanding for some: “The younger monks, especially when they cannot sing dang, become bored or sleepy. It is a little too slow for them, I think, and it is so low that it puts them to sleep! [*laughs*].”<sup>38</sup> It is difficult to say how much modernity has influenced the younger generation of monks. While exposure to foreign secular music and culture is likely influencing the current generation of monks, this exposure does not necessarily correlate with the seeming increased disinterest in traditional melodies.

Regardless, we must understand the concept of nyenpa in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music as it relates to function and purpose. Specifically, chant melodies have both human

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

and supernatural value, which contribute to their degrees of nyenpa. Dang melodies are intended primarily for the ears of deities and buddhas. As Alice Egyed writes, when ancient practitioners wished to call upon the protectors and other deities “to defend the Buddhist doctrine...texts and mantras were not strong enough...they had to be sung to make them effective”<sup>39</sup> Specifically, the songs had to be composed based on a deity’s features and qualities.

For the human performer, dang melodies are arguably the best equipped to aid in meditation, specifically with visualization and the attainment of mental calm. The nature of dang – that is, their relationship with their respective deities – is believed to help one visualize the deity, and thus “overcome the duality between the self and the deity.”<sup>40</sup> By chanting in a way that embodies Mahakala, for example, a performer can more easily cultivate not just a mental image of Mahakala, but their entire being. Thus, chanting dang allows the performer to extend the ultimate offering to a deity – his completely devoted, undivided mind and body.

The aural characteristics of dang melodies are also ideal for achieving inner peace and tranquility. “Even if you cannot chant dang,” Umdze Kale suggests, “you can still sit and listen...[*demonstrates, indicating relaxation*] and your mind will be calm.”<sup>41</sup> Dan melodies create an ideal atmosphere in which to attain inner peace, and to move toward two related Buddhist goals – to “develop inwardly, moving through deeper insight all the way up to the ultimate level of realization,” and to develop compassion for all sentient

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<sup>39</sup> Alice Egyed, “Theory and Practice of Music in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Tradition” (PhD. diss., University of Washington, 2000), 64.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (1 December 2009).

beings.<sup>42</sup> Thus, dang has a greater degree of nyenpa because of its nature and its ability to create such an atmosphere.

It would be entirely unfair to conclude that yang and dön melodies are unsuitable for use in meditation. Again, it is crucial to remember that the three categories only help to outline a range of different melodies. Moreover, yang and dön have their respective purposes. For example yang is faster and busier (in relation to the text) than dang, and thus requires more attention to the lyrics: “[Wth yang] you are forced to focus more on the words...and because it is a nice melody, the words are stronger.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the fast, repetitious, and rhythmic qualities of dön chanting help to ingrain the words in the mind. Thus, yang and dön naturally prompt the performer to reflect on and internalize the prayers, albeit in a different way than dang melodies do. What they lack in the traditional sense of nyenpa, it makes up for in efficiency and functional beauty.

Nyenpa can be understood as the inspirational aspect of music. A beautiful melody empowers lyrics; this idea is not foreign to the Western music world. True, dang melodies may kindle particularly intense feelings of devotion. However, all ritual vocal music plays a significant role in the generation of compassion and faith. There exists a cyclical relationship between the music, the performer, and the ritual. The melodies of the words inspire the performer, and the performer then fuels the ritual. The ritual is given power and meaning, which further encourages the performer. Thus vocal music is essential to the devotion that fuels the Buddhist tradition. The question remains: who, or what, inspired and continues to inspire the music?

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<sup>42</sup> Michele Martin, *The Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 224.

<sup>43</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (1 December 2009).

## Vocal music compositions

### *Cosmic Onomatopoeia: Compositions in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition*

The composition of ritual vocal music is a necessary part of the Buddhist tradition, and the most revered lamas have and continue to compose music today. These compositions have taken a variety of forms. The first dang melodies date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the Sakya master Rinchen Zangpo (*Rin-chen Bzang-po*) was instructed in a dream to compose a melody.<sup>44</sup> Mahakala supposedly visited Rinchen Zangpo in a series of visions, urging him to sing “with a ferocious voice,” like “tigers fighting over a corpse.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, dang are designed to emulate a particular deity’s characteristics. Such compositions are significant to Buddhist practice regarding deity appeasement and visualization.

Melodic compositions more often serve to preserve lineage. Buddhism has thrived on its ability to sustain precious teachings and wisdom throughout many generations. The Kagyu school is especially known for its strong core of masters and their unbroken transmission of significant Buddhist thought. The name “Kagyu” itself refers to this lineage:

“The first syllable ‘Ka’ [*bka*] refers to the scriptures of the Buddha and the oral instructions of the guru. ‘Ka’ has the sense both of the enlightened meaning conveyed by the words of the teacher, as well as the force that such words of insight carries. The second syllable ‘gyu’ [*brgyud*] means

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<sup>44</sup> Alice Egyed, “Theory and Practice of Music in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastic Tradition” (PhD. diss., University of Washington, 2000), 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

lineage or tradition. Together, these syllables mean ‘the lineage of the oral instructions.’<sup>46</sup>

The Kagyu tradition is so strong because of the relationships between the gurus and disciples. Each master began as a student who devoted himself entirely to his teacher.



**Figure 5. His Eminence the 12th Situ Rinpoche (left) offers an empowerment to His Holiness the 17th and current Gyalwa Karmapa**

The tradition began with the Indian yogi Tilopa (988-1069), who gained enlightened realization after years of meditation and various teachings. His main disciple was Naropa, another Indian scholar, who in turn received the teachings and attained realization. One of Naropa’s disciples, Marpa (in Tibetan, Chökyi Lodrö [*chos-kyi blo-gros*]), would be the first Tibetan in the history of the Kagyu lineage. Next came Milarepa (*Mi-la-ras-pa*), an eccentric hermit who became one of Tibet’s most revered yogis. Milarepa passed the oral teachings to Gampopa (*sgam-po-pa*), who in turn taught the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (*dus-gsum mkhyen-pa*) (1110-1193). This started an unbroken line of successive Karmapas who, to this day, have played a major role in the Kagyu school.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Kagyu Office: the Website of His Holiness Gyalwang Karmapa, <http://www.kagyuoffice.org/>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

These masters were well known for composing spontaneous, poetic songs ([singular] Sanskrit: doha; Tibetan: gur [*mgur*]), in which the composer expresses his devotion for his guru and summarizes teachings or realizations. Dohas deal with a variety of topics and purposes. In some cases a master will, upon request, compose and perform a spontaneous melodic lesson for their audience. Other dohas express doubt, sadness, and frustration at a difficult time in the composer's studies and practices.

**Figure 6. "Painting of Milarepa"**



Dohas are an interesting case with regards to the Tibetan Buddhist musical repertoire. Like Rinchen Zangpo, the ancient dang composer, the great doha composers were often inspired by visions of deities and gurus. While some dohas are truly meant for gurus (who can function as deities), it does not seem like any dohas were originally composed and sung with dang melodies. In fact, it is thought that the poems were spontaneously sung “in the style of popular songs of the period.”<sup>48</sup>

Regardless, dohas are treated as any other text in a monastic repertoire, in the sense that they may be performed with a number of melodies (“Audio Example 2” in Appendix B is a doha composed by Gampopa, performed with a melody with both dang

<sup>48</sup> Nalanda Translation Committee, trans., *The Rain of Wisdom* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1980), 300.



and yang elements). Sherab Ling performs a puja every year after the Tibetan New Year (Losar [*lo-gsar*]) that consists of the entire Kagyu Gurtso.<sup>49</sup> According to Umdze Kale, the puja features a different melody every year: “This year, for example, we will sing all guryang [*mgur-dbyangs*], but every year it is different.”<sup>50</sup> Thus the dohas have been adopted into the monastic textual repertoire and are treated as text that can be sung in a number of ways.

Dohas are particularly valuable for a number of reasons. First, they illustrate intensely devotional relationships between disciple and guru. A composer traditionally begins each doha with a verse praising or supplicating his teacher, regardless of the doha’s subject (See “Lyrics 1” in Appendix B for several examples). This demonstrates the amount of devotion the disciples had for their teachers – the kind of devotion that is necessary to maintain and keep the precious Buddhist teachings.

Dohas not only shed light on the importance of lineage, but also help to preserve the actual lineage. Most dohas are condensed lessons and realizations, straight from the masters who so diligently passed their knowledge down from one to another. The spontaneity of these pieces gives them unique value because they reveal a master’s struggles and triumphs as they strove to attain enlightenment: “Immediacy of expression was the important factor in these songs, rather than originality...They are intensely experiential and tend to emphasize the quality of journeying on the Buddhist path.”<sup>51</sup> This

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<sup>49</sup> (*bka'-brgyud mgur-mtsho*), a collection of dohas in the Kagyu lineage, and dubbed “The Rain of Wisdom” in English. The 8<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje (*mi-brgyud rdo-rje*), first compiled this collection, and Kagyu leaders have continued to expand on it.

<sup>50</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (22 November 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Nalanda Translation Committee, trans., *The Rain of Wisdom* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1980), 300.

in-the-moment quality makes these dohas incredible tools with which to substantiate the legends of these composers and to inspire future generations.

The fact that the Buddhist masters chose to sing their thoughts and ideas is evidence of the power of music. If a master were visited by an overwhelming vision or dream, he would quite literally break into song; if a master sang for others, the audience was often be moved to the point of devotion. Music is a natural means of expression and inspiration, and thus an effective vehicle through which to preserve the masters' teachings.

At the same time the music is only as important as the message that it holds. This is especially relevant to the preservation of lineage teachings. Umdze Kale offers the following analogy: "When there is power, a light switch easily produces light in the room. However, when the power goes out the light switch is useless."<sup>52</sup> Just as the power source and the light switch are mutually dependent to provide light, the lineage teachings and the dohas work together to pass on important insight and to inspire devotion.

### ***Inspiration and the compositional process***

We may generalize and say that incarnate lamas compose dang and yang melodies in one of two ways. In the first case, the melodies are "directly revealed to those who visit the extraphenomenal realms of the deities and their music performed in meditations and dreams..."<sup>53</sup> In other words, the lama directly receives a melody from a god, or they are inspired by the dream to compose the melody. Both result from external, divine involvement; for example, Rinchen Zangpo was visited by Mahakala and instructed to

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<sup>52</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the auhtor, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (22 November 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Terry Jay Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 335.

compose those first dang compositions. Similarly, many dohas have been inspired by visions of the composers' gurus or other deities. In the second case, a lama quite simply creates a melody "without any reference to celestial models, in what seems to be a more spontaneous process..."<sup>54</sup> In some situations, this may involve an intentional, albeit on-the-spot, performance; for example, a master may meet an audience's request with a doha. Other times, however, a melody will, unprovoked, suddenly appear in the composer's mind. Many Western musicians admit to experiencing the same unpredictable form of inspiration.

For the most part, divine inspiration and unexpected creativity are both unintentional compositional processes. It may be true that some lamas deliberately work out compositions; Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (*chos-rgyam 'khyungs-pa rin-po-che*) humbly writes, "...reading [The Rain of Wisdom] inspired me to compose beginner-level songs myself, which I did by trial and error."<sup>55</sup> However, it seems that the highly realized incarnate lamas generally do not practice this method. In fact, it is perhaps incorrect to even call their processes "methods" because there is seems to be no effort involved. In the Western music world, there is variation. In fact most Western composers spend a great deal of effort working to perfect their pieces, and so they are often rewarded for their creativity and musical prowess.

The process of composition, then, is very much related to the relative significance of music within a culture. Western music is an art form, a medium through which to express oneself in a way that garners appreciation from others. Tibetan Buddhist ritual music, however, is tool with which to connect with deities and to generate compassion

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 336.

<sup>55</sup> Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, foreword to *The Rain of Wisdom*, translated by Nalanda Translation Committee (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1980), xi.

and devotion through meditation. The processes by which Buddhist masters have composed melodies thus contribute to the functional importance of the ritual vocal music. In order to fully understand the importance of composition and of ritual vocal music in general, however, one must examine the nature of the actual composers. In truth, it is not how a lama composes a melody, but who that lama is, that is most valuable to grasping the essence of ritual vocal music.

### *The Composer*

As Ellingson suggests:

“...There is no difference in value, and ultimately little practical difference, between ‘spontaneous’ and vision-patterned compositions, since creative spontaneity is itself a result of the spiritually-advanced person’s direct experience of more perfect realities.”<sup>56</sup>

A master’s ability to connect with deities, and his potential to host spontaneous moments of creation, are both products of the lama’s nature – their connections to deities as bodhisattvas and their possession and accumulation of wisdom and skill over many lives.

The higher lamas are generally thought to be emanations of deities. For example, the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are both considered emanations of Chenrezig.<sup>57</sup> These lamas are thus capable of accessing the divine realms because of these personal connections to deities. Further, lamas like the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are bodhisattvas ([singular] (Sanskrit); Tibetan: chang-chub-sem-pai [*byang-chub-sems-*

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<sup>56</sup> Terry Jay Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 336.

<sup>57</sup> (Sanskrit: Avalokitesvara; Tibetan: Chenrezig [*spyān-ras-gzigs*])) an important deity who embodies compassion.

*dpa*’]) who have attained enlightenment many lives ago. They have simply reached a Buddhist level of realization that allows them to connect with deities.

A bodhisattva exists such that they are able to tap into the knowledge and awareness they accumulated in their previous lives. This potential must be cultivated through correct practice and training, but as a result the incarnate lama gains knowledge and excels in various subjects at a relatively faster rate. The Karmapa lineage is a perfect example of this phenomenon. In addition to displaying exceptional wisdom and foresight throughout each life, many previous Karmapas were accomplished in the arts, mainly in poetry, song, and art.<sup>58</sup> They composed a number of dohas that appear in the Kagyu Gurtso. The 16<sup>th</sup> and previous Karmapa, Ranjung Rigpe Dorje (*rang-byung rig-pa’ rdo-rje*), wrote several songs predicting the Chinese invasion of Tibet and his own flight to India.<sup>59</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> and current Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje (*o-rgyan ‘phrin-las rdo-rje*) (1985–), is already gifted in the arts, mainly painting, poetry, and music. He wrote his first poem at the age of 9, entitled “Four Line Aspiration Prayer” (See “Lyrics 2” in Appendix B).<sup>60</sup> Since then, the Karmapa has composed dozens of poems. He wrote one of his most well known compositions, “A Joyful Aspiration: Sweet Melody for the Fortunate Ones”, one night while escaping from Tibet (See “Lyrics 3” in Appendix B).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The Karmapa was the first incarnate lama to predict the details of his own rebirth. He is also known for his ability to recognize reincarnation of other lamas.

<sup>59</sup> Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 295-303.

<sup>60</sup> Kagyu Office: the Website of His Holiness Gyalwang Karmapa, <http://www.kagyuoffice.org/>.

<sup>61</sup> Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 226-8.



**Figure 7. "Painting of the 16 previous Karmapas, composed by His Holiness the 17th and current Gyalwa Karmapa"**

Like the dohas of previous masters, his pieces pray for the well being of sentient beings and also provide bits of dharma teachings. Compositions like “The Three Kayas” and “Pointing Out Mahamudra” are short pieces designed to enforce important Buddhist doctrines through meditation (See “Lyrics 4” in Appendix B). The idea is that the melody and the poetic language, when repeated thoroughly in meditation, will effectively help to internalize the teachings. The Karmapa’s poems also pay homage to teachers and people who are especially important to him.<sup>62</sup> The fact that the Karmapa continues to honor his gurus today is an indication of the importance of the lineage.

In addition to melodic poems, the Karmapa has also composed a vast number of yang melodies that have been adopted into the repertoires of many Kagyu monasteries.<sup>63</sup> He admits that he composes in both of the two aforementioned processes – divine inspiration and mere spontaneity. When asked about his compositions, the Karmapa

<sup>62</sup> See “A Radiant Smile of Spontaneous Confidence”, a “long life prayer” for Situ Rinpoche, in *Ibid*, 254-5.

<sup>63</sup> His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa, interview with the author, Gyutö Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India (24 November 2009).

explained, “Sometimes I sit and meditate and it comes naturally. I do not have to try...I do not have to start over [*indicating crumpling up a written draft*]...It comes on the first try.”<sup>64</sup> For him, the process of artistic composition in itself is meditative and pleasant. Even at the age of twenty-four, the young lama recognizes the immense value of the arts.

His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa has tapped into the artistic skills from his previous lives, thus enabling him to excel so quickly at such a young age. To what degree can the Karmapa’s artistic output be accredited to his own creative capacity? How much of his ability is accounted for by the twenty-four-year-old Ogyen Trinley Dorje, and how much by every previous Karmapa, including associations with Chenrezig? The concept of reincarnation, and of a human being “picking up” where they left off in their previous life, demands serious questions about inspiration and creativity.

Attempting to unravel the mystery of inspiration and creativity with a “Tibetan Buddhist ritual music” frame proves to be fruitless. Even if we know who a lama was in previous lives, we are still clueless as to how, and when, their potential skill chooses to manifest in a musical composition. Many Western musicians claim that their creativity is quite inconsistent; on a given day they may struggle to produce a musical piece with no results, and the next day they might think of a brilliant composition without trying. Situ Rinpoche agrees that a forced creative effort rarely works – inspiration unprovoked often produces the best results.<sup>65</sup> Still, it seems impossible to determine when a flash of genius will strike, even from an incarnate lama.

However, it is unnecessary to explain how a lama like the Karmapa can compose in the ways that he does. It is vital, rather, to understand the fact that his identity actually

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> His Eminence Tai Situpa Rinpoche, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (18 November 2009).

gives meaning to his compositions. In other words, the previously accumulated wisdom and realization of an incarnate lama is the true source of a melody composition's value.

Umdze Kale explains:

“I have enough musical training so that I could sit down and put together many melodies, and some of them may even be beautiful, you know [*laughs*]? But they would be meaningless, just empty songs. I am not a rinpoche, so my songs would not mean anything.”<sup>66</sup>

The emphasis, then, is not on musical creativity or craftsmanship, but rather some supernatural significance that only some composers can impart. This is an entirely foreign concept in the world of Western music, in which new faces compete for acknowledgement of their fresh, personal ideas. Yet, Tibetan Buddhist ritual music is not about performing and displaying creative compositions; its purpose is to connect performers with deities, inspire devotion, and preserve lineage. Only someone with the level of realization of a bodhisattva can produce a melody that can perform these functions. Thus a lama's nature is what makes their creations valuable and worth preserving.

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<sup>66</sup> Umdze Kale, interview with the author, Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India (22 November 2009).



## Conclusion

Tibetan Buddhist ritual vocal music is deeply connected to the tradition of realization and lineage. Melodies are useful the daily practice of prayer and meditation, and they also help to carry on the lineage. The composition of songs and melodies has been an essential practice in the preservation of wisdom and the reinvigoration of devotion and compassion. The process of composing gives meaning to the pieces themselves, and the nature of the composers reveals the ultimate source of value in the music. Thus, an understanding of the relationship between composer and music is crucial to studying the essence of Tibetan Buddhist ritual music, especially from a Western perspective.

An examination of musical composition illustrates the differences between Tibetan Buddhist and Western concepts of inspiration, beauty (*nyenpa*), and creativity. Essentially, the Tibetan Buddhist religious goals and commitment to lineage and Western emphasis on artistic expression and innovation are dissonant forces. However, both musical worlds indicate a universal importance of tradition, albeit in different ways. As shown, Tibetan Buddhism encourages and even depends on the preservation of original teachings and practices, and the practice of vocal composition illustrates this commitment. Yet, the Western music world is no different. Every Western musical piece, no matter how inventive or new, is inexorably tied to some tradition – a genre, some form of musical theory, etc. The fact that compositions are almost always constructed to fit into a certain style indicates the equal importance of tradition and history in Western

music. Unlike Tibetan Buddhist music, however, “old” and “new” styles and pieces are simultaneously encouraged.

To what degree are contemporary compositions “new” in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music? Indifferent to the time period, music always seems to come forth through a lama to voice the ancient teachings of the dharma and to preserve a historical lineage. The mere nature of the lama, which gives meaning to the music, is always looking backward to previous lives and traditional deities. So in one sense, the music and inspiration itself are always “old”, never changing. Yet, there must undoubtedly exist some variation from composer to composer; each lama and each lifetime are different, so there must be an element of “newness” in every composition. Any deeper explanation requires further study. As it is, both Tibetan Buddhist and Western music consist of complex balances between tradition and function. Once one grasps the role of composition in Tibetan ritual music, one can begin to tackle Western questions of inspiration and modernity. The Tibetan Buddhism offers an incredibly unique setting in which to appreciate music. The key to properly understanding its value is grasping how composition and the composer himself give the music a profoundly special importance.

## Appendix A: Glossary of selected Tibetan terms and proper names

All Tibetan words are presented below in alphabetical order based on their phonetic Tibetan spelling, unless referred to in Sanskrit in the paper (proper names listed separately with author's definitions). Each term is listed with its Tibetan transliteration in parentheses, and its definition according to the 2004 University of California edition of *The New Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibet* (Editor: Goldestein, Melvyn C.), with the page number in bracket (unless otherwise noted). Some definitions given may differ slightly from their interpretations in the paper. Additionally, each term is written in the Tibetan uchen (*dbu-can*) script – the handwriting and spelling are my own responsibility.

[Note: The transliterations provided are according to Turrell Wylie's method. Wylie transliteration is the standard Tibetan-Roman scheme]

### *Terms*

**bodhisattva** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: chang chub sen pai [*byang-chub-sems-dpa'*] – an enlightened being who seeks to benefit all other sentient beings [author's definition].

**dang** (*gdangs*) – 1. tone, pitch. 2. tune, melody. 4. chanting in low tones [557].

**doha** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: gur [*mugr*]) – a classical religious poem, usually composed and performed spontaneously as a song [author's definition].

**dön** (*'don*) – 1. to cause to come out, to put forth, to take/bring out... 2. va. to say, to tread (prayers), to intone [580].

**lama** (*bla-ma*) – lama, guru, teacher (spiritual/religious) [743].

**nyenpa** (*snyan-pa*) *snyan-pa* (“nyenpa”) – 1. pleasant, interesting (to hear) [434].

**pecha** (*dpe-cha*) – book (usu. traditional style) [650].

**puja** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: chöpa [*mchod-pa*] – religious offering [382].

**rinpoche** (*rin-po-che*) – 1. precious. 2. a term of address/title for incarnate lamas [1040].

**tulku** (*sprul-sku*) – incarnate lama, rinpoche [670].

**yang** (*dbyangs*) – 1. vowel. 2. melody, tune. 3. va. to sing [756].

### ***Proper Names***

**Cakrasamvara** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Korlo Demchog [*'khor-lo bde-mchog*]) – an important meditational deity in Tibetan Buddhism.

**Chenrezig** (Sanskrit: Avalokiteshvara) (Tibetan: *spyen-ras-gzigs*) – the bodhisattva of compassion. The Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are considered to be emanations of him.

**Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche** (*chos-rgyam 'khyungs-pa rin-po-che*) – an important figure in the Kagyu lineage, the 11<sup>th</sup> Trungpa Rinpoche was a distinguished teacher of Tibetan Buddhism in the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He founded the Nalanda Translation Committee, which translated Kagyu Gurtso into English (*The Rain of Wisdom*).

**Düsum Khyenpa** (*dus-gsum mkhyen-pa*) – The first Gyalwa Karmapa and head of the Karma Kagyu tradition.

**Gampopa** (*sgam-po-pa*) – One of Milarepa’s most important disciples and founder of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Gyalwa Karmapa** (*rgya-wa rkrm-pa*) – the founder of the Karma Kagyu tradition and the head of the Kagyu school. The Karmapa is a bodhisattva who is believed to be an emanation of Chenrezig.

**Kagyu** (*bka'-brgyud*) – one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasizes the importance of unbroken oral transmissions from guru to disciple.

**Kagyu Gurtso** (*bka'-brgyud mgur-tsho*) – Translated into English as “The Rain of Wisdom”, a collection of dohas written by masters in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Karma Kagyu** (*ka-rma bka'-brgyud*) – the largest tradition in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, founded and headed by the Gyalwa Karmapa.

**Mahakala** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Nagpo Chenpo [*gnag-po chen-po*]) – an important and particularly wrathful protector deity in Tibetan Buddhism.

**Marpa** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Chökyi Lodrö [*chos-kyi blo-gros*]) – considered to be the first Tibetan master in the history of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and teacher of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa.

**Milarepa** (*mi-la-ras-pa*) – one of the most revered and well-known Tibetan Buddhist masters, and especially important to the Kagyu school. Believed to have attained enlightenment in a single human lifetime, and also an important poet and doha composer.

**Ogyen Trinley Dorje** (*o-rgyan 'phrin-las rdo-rje*) – the 17<sup>th</sup> and current Gyalwa Karmapa, and head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Padmasambhava** [Sanskrit] (Tibetan: Guru Rinpoche [*gu-ru rin-po-che*]) - An Indian tantric master who is credited with establishing Buddhism in Tibet in the 9th century.

**Palpung Sherab Ling** (*dpal-spungs shes-rab gling*) – a Karma Kagyu monastery in the Himachal Pradesh region in northwest India, and the monastic seat of Tai Situpa Rinpoche.

**Tai Situpa Rinpoche** (*ta'i si-tu-pa rin-po-che*) – one of the four heart sons of the Gyalwa Karmapa and an important tulku in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. The 12<sup>th</sup> and current Situ Rinpoche founded the Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery in India, and was a major player in the discovery of the 17<sup>th</sup> and current Gyalwa Karmapa.

## **Personal Interviewees**

**Dhondrup Gyatso (*don-grub rgya-mtsho*)**

**Dhondrup Gyeltsen (*don-grub rgyal-mtshan*)**

**His Eminence the 12<sup>th</sup> Tai Situpa Rinpoche (*ta'i si-tu-pa rin-po-che*)**

**Ogyen Trinley Dorje, His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa (*o-rgyan 'phrin-las rdo-rje*)**

**Kelsan Yeshe, a.k.a. Umdze Kale (*skal-bzang ye-shes*), (*bdu-mdzad ka-le*)**

**Lobsang (*blo-bzang*)**

**Tenzin Youdon (*bsdan-'dzin gyu-sgron*)**

**Umdze Lama Tsering (*dbu-mdzad bla-ma tshe-ring*)**

**Appendix B: Lyrics and Audio Examples** [Note: Supplemental disc corresponds with audio examples]

*Lyrics I:* Three doha compositions by the great yogi and poet, Milarepa

**“The Seven Adornments”<sup>67</sup>**

I pay homage to Marpa The Translator,  
I, who see the ultimate essence of being,  
Sing the song of [Seven] Adornments.

You mischievous demons her assembled,  
Lend your ears and listen closely to my song.

By the side of Sumeru, the central mountain,  
The sky shines blue o’er the Southern Continent,  
The firmament is the beauty of the earth,  
The blue of heaven its adornment.

High above the Great Tree of sumeru  
Shine radiant beams from sun and moon,  
Lighting the Four Continents.  
With love and compassion, the Naga King  
    wields his miraculous power:  
From the immense sky, he lets fall the fain.  
Of the earth, this is the adornment.

From the great ocean vapors rise,  
Reaching the vast sky.  
They form great clouds;  
A causal law governs the transformations  
    of the elements.

In midsummer, rainbows appear above the plain,  
Gently resting upon the hills.  
Of the plains and mountains,  
The rainbow is the beauty and adornment.

In the West, when rain falls in the cold ocean,  
Bushes and trees flourish on the earth.  
To all creatures on the Continent,  
These are the beauty and adornment.

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<sup>67</sup> Garma C.C. Chang, trans., *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 14-6.



I, the Yogi who desires to remain in solitude,  
 Meditate on the Voidness of Mind.  
 Awed by the power of my concentration,  
 You jealous demons are forced to practice magic.  
 Of the yogi, demonic conjurations  
 Are the beauty and adornment.

You Non-men, listen closely and hearken to me!  
 Do you know who I am?  
 I am the Yogi Milarepa;  
 From my heart emerges  
 The flower of Mind–Enlightenment.  
 With a clear voice I sing this allegory to you,  
 With sincere words I reach the Dharma for you,  
 With a gracious heart I give you this advice.  
 If in your hearts the Will-for-Bodhi sprouts,  
 Though you may not be of help to others,  
 By renouncing the Ten Evils,  
 Know that you will win joy and liberation.  
 If you follow my teachings,  
 your accomplishments will increase greatly;  
 If you practice the Dharma now,  
 Everlasting joy will last enfold you.

**“The Song of Seven Truths”<sup>68</sup>**

I make obeisance to you, Marpa the Translator.  
 I pray that you grant me increase of Bodhi-Mind.

However beautiful a song’s words may be,  
 It is but a tune to those  
 Who grasp not the words of Truth.

If a parable agrees not with Buddha’s teaching,  
 However eloquent it may sound,  
 ‘Tis but a booming echo.

If one does not practice Dharma,  
 However learned in the Doctrines one may claim to be,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 16-7.

One is only self-deceived.

Living in solitude is self-imprisonment,  
 If one practice not the instruction of the  
     Oral Transmission.  
 Labor on the farm is but self-punishment,  
 If one neglects the teaching of the Buddha.

For those who do not guard their morals,  
 Prayers are but wishful thinking.  
 For those who do not practice what they preach,  
 Oratory is but faithless lying.

Wrong-doing shunned, sins of themselves diminish;  
 Good deeds done, merit will be gained.  
 Remain in solitude, and meditate alone;  
 Much talking is of no avail.  
 Follow what I sing, and practice Dharma!

**Doha from “The Three Vows”<sup>69</sup>**

Lord great Vajradhara, embodied in Marpa,  
 Grant your blessings so that this lowly one may keep to retreat

Mila Thögpaga, you are strange.  
 This song of self-advice, you sing for your own benefit.

There are no companions to tell you good news.  
 When you want to see the sights, the valley is empty.  
 When you want to remove sadness, there is no support.

Don’t think; don’t let your mind think; rest naturally.  
 If you think, all sorts of meaningless thoughts will  
     occur.

Don’t wander; don’t wander; remain mindful.  
 If you wander, your spiritual practice will be cast to  
     the wind.

Don’t go; don’t go; stay where you sleep.

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<sup>69</sup> Nalanda Translation Committee, trans., *The Rain of Wisdom* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1980), 180-1.

If you go, you will stumble on a rock.

Don't look up; don't look up; keep you head bowed.  
If you look up, you will go empty-handed.

Don't sleep; don't sleep; do your practice.  
If you sleep, careless, you will be overcome by the  
five poisons.

Even if I am not liberated by practice,  
May I die in this empty unpeopled valley.

***Lyrics 2:*** “Four Line Aspiration Prayer” by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa<sup>70</sup>

Unequaled son of Shuddhodhana, foremost among human beings,  
Guru Padmakara, a second Buddha,  
Düsum Kyenpa, founder of the teaching tradition of the Practice Lineage,  
I supplicate you: grant your blessings

Having reached the age of nine years, this was written during the festival of Saga Dawa of the Water-bird year of the 17<sup>th</sup> Rabjung (1993) at the Dharma Palace of Tsur Dowo Lung. By the one blessed by having received the name Buddha Karmapa, and called Pal Khyabdak Rangjung Ugyen Gyalwae Nyugu Trinley Dorje Tsal Choklé Nampar Gyalwae Dé. May this be virtuous.

***Lyrics 3:*** “A Joyful Aspiration: Sweet Melody for the Fortunate Ones” by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa<sup>71</sup>

Om Swasti. The right-turning conch of pure compassion in body,  
speech, and mind  
Pours forth a stream of good intentions that never change.  
Thereby, may a sweet, resonant melody beyond compare, such music  
for the ears,  
Open the lotus petals of virtue, excellence, and goodness.

<sup>70</sup> Kagyu Office: the Website of His Holiness Gyalwang Karmapa, <http://www.kagyuoffice.org/>.

<sup>71</sup> Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 226-7.

It has the supreme name of the Wish-Fulfilling Tree, the ambrosial one.  
Musical tones of this flawless tree, granting every wish, are dulcet and  
pleasing.

Throughout its branches gems of lasting happiness nestle among their  
leaves.

Sovereign in our realm, may the world be resplendent with the beauty  
of this tree.

#### ASPIRATION FOR TIBET

A string of fragrant flowers, these snow mountains are tranquil and  
fresh.

In a healing land where white incense rises sweet,  
May the gracious beauty of luminous moonbeams, light of the spiritual  
and temporal worlds,

Conquer all strife, this darkness of the shadow side.

#### ASPIRATION FOR THE DALAI LAMA

Inspiring festivals of merit in the Land of Snow,  
You are the Supreme One holding a pure white lotus.  
With the beauty of all good qualities, a treasure for eyes to behold,  
May your life be long, steadfast as a diamond vajra.

#### ASPIRATION FOR CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE

The most excellent virtue is the brilliant, calm flow of culture:  
Thos with fine minds play in a clear lotus lake;  
Through this excellent path, a songline sweet like the pollen's honey,  
May they sip the fragrant dew of splendid knowledge.

#### ASPIRATION FOR THE WORLD

Over the expanse of the treasured earth in this vast world,  
May benefit for beings appear like infinite moons' reflections;  
Their refreshing presence brings lasting welfare and happiness  
To open a lovely array of night-blooming lilies, signs of peace and joy.

#### CONCLUSION

Descending from a canopy of white clouds, the gathering of two  
accumulations,  
May these true words, like pearled drops of light or pouring rain  
Falling in a lovely park where fortunate disciples are free of bias,  
Open the flowers of friendship and let well-being and joy blossom forth.

These words of aspiration, sprung from a sincere intention, were written down by  
Ogyen Trinley, the one who bears the noble name of the Karmapa, while he was  
escaping from Tibet. One night in the illusory appearance of a dream, there arose  
a lake bathed in a clear moonlight and rippled with blossoming lotus flowers that

served as a seat for three Brahmins, wearing pure white silk and playing a drum, guitar, flute, and other instruments. Created in pleasing and lyric tones, their melodious song came to my ears, and so I composed this aspiration prayer with a one-pointed mind, filled with an intense and sincere intention to benefit all the people of Tibet. Within a beautiful, auspicious chain of snow mountains, this land of Tibet, may the sun rays of this supreme aspiration for awakening swiftly appear.

As the piece became popular in the Tibetan community, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) put music to the poem. Lobsang, the Artistic Director of TIPA, personally composed the new melody to “Joyful Aspiration” for everyone’s enjoyment [See “Audio Example 3”].<sup>72</sup> The melody, however, is not used in monasteries; in fact, none of the music that TIPA practices and performs is. Lobsang admits that, though the institute may take interest in gur melodies in the future, TIPA performs the poems, including those of Milarepa, with *chö* melodies. These are “more simple, melodically interesting, and pleasant to hear than gur,” but they are not featured in monastic repertoires.<sup>73</sup>

***Lyrics 4:*** Two short meditational poems by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa

“The Three Kayas”<sup>74</sup>

The Dharmakaya is naturally arisen, the ultimate;  
The sambhogakaya is all-pervading, bliss-emptiness unceasing;  
Through the nirmanakaya pouring forth a rain of joy;  
May auspiciousness in all its glory be present.

“Pointing Out Mahamudra”<sup>75</sup>

Like the illusory face of this appearing world,  
The movement of mind is not touched by artifice;

<sup>72</sup> Lobsang, interview by author, Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts, McLeod Ganj, India (27 November 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003), 230.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 236.

It is not altered by action, freedom, or realization.  
 To remain in the depths of mind free of reference  
 Is known as mahamudra.

**Audio Example 1:** Two recordings of “Refuge Prayer”

The following two audio examples (tracks 1 and 2 on disc) are recordings of the same refuge prayer, performed by different monasteries. The translations are provided by the respective source CDs. Note the similarity in lyrics and vast difference in melody.

**Track 1:** Lama Khenno (Ngedon Oselling Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal), *Calling the Guru from Afar* (Track 1).

sang gyay chö dang tshog kyi chog nam la  
 jang chub bar du dag ni kyab su chi  
 dag gi jinsog gyi pay sönam kyi  
 dro la phan chir sang gyay drub par shog.

*Until becoming enlightened, I take refuge,  
 In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly.  
 May my merits from generosity and so forth  
 Result in Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.*

This performance uses a yang melody, with a faster, loping rhythm and a slightly higher pitch. In fact, there is such little variation in pitch that it might be considered a ‘donta melody.

**Track 2:** The Monks of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery (Himachal Pradesh, India), *Relative Sound of the Ultimate* (Track 2 – “Khapdo Semchay [Refuge Bodhichitta]).

*In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly  
 I take refuge until enlightenment.  
 By the merit of my practicing generosity and so forth  
 May I attain Buddhahood for the welfare of all beings.*

This performance uses a dang melody, with a much slower, less consistent rhythm and a slightly lower pitch.

*Audio Example 2: Gampopa's Doha*

**Track 3:** The Monks of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, *Relative Sound of the Ultimate* (Track 9 – “Gampopa’s Doha”, or “It Has Been Foretold”).

This is a doha known as “Sho mo! Come back up!” **footnote rain**. It was composed by Gampopa, one of the Kagyu masters (disciple of Milarepa, guru for Dusum Khyenpa the 1<sup>st</sup> Karmapa), and it was written and sung for three Tibetan men – for the complete story and the complete lyrics, see Rain of Wisdom 275-282. The translation is provided by the source CD.

Kaye!  
 Three supreme spiritual sons listen!  
 Sons, don't go but come here.  
 Long ago, many lifetimes before this,  
 We had a profound karmic link.  
 In the presence of the protector Shakyamuni,  
 The Lord, the perfect Buddha, the Bhagavan,  
 When I was the youthful Canadraprabha  
 I requested and received the teachings of the Sutra of King-Like Concentration,  
 Together with an assembled retinue of ten thousand  
 Led by you my vajra brothers.

The Thus Gone One spoke these words:

*In the future during the time of degeneration  
 There will be one who will spread the meaning  
 Of the profound Dharma, this Sutra of King-Like Concentration,  
 An heir of all the Buddhas of the three times  
 The supreme physician who cures all the diseases of disturbing emotions  
 There will come a man praised by all the Victors.*

At that time this was repeatedly proclaimed to all,  
 I swore to propagate the Dharma,  
 And the entire audience assembled there  
 Made promises and aspiration to offer assistance.  
 Endowed with fortunate karma and virtue,  
 Past aspirations have brought us together at this excellent time and place.  
 We were correctly taught the topics of the profound Dharma,  
 And established at the level of non-regression.  
 Sons, don't go but come here.

This performance uses a melody that is in between dang and yang. It is slow enough to be dang but too much of a melody with a discernable pitch; in other words there is not enough fluctuation and smooth contour to be truly considered dang.

***Audio Example 3:*** Two recordings of “Joyful Aspiration”

**Track 4:** *Sweet melody of Joyful Aspiration* (Track 2 – “Joyful Aspiration”).

This performance features music composed by Lobsang, the artistic director of TIPA, and lyrics composed by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa.

**Track 5:** *Sweet melody of Joyful Aspiration* (Track 8 – “Joyful Aspiration”).

This performance is a solo chant of the same poem, performed by His Holiness.

***Audio Example 4:*** “Feast Offering Melody” by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa

**Track 6:** H.H. the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa, *Sweet melody of Joyful Aspiration* (Track 5 – “feast offering melody”).

His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa composed this yang melody, although he is not performing the solo chant in the recording.



## Appendix C: Methodology

My interest in the topic of ritual music composition started with an interest in the Karmapa, so I worked exclusively with monks in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Even so, it would be too ambitious to work with all four major schools, since the musical repertoires vary from monastery to monastery, let alone school to school. I conducted the majority of research at Sherab Ling Monastery in Himachal Pradesh, India. This is the seat of Situ Rinpoche, one of the Karmapa's heart sons and an important player in the discovery of his 17<sup>th</sup> incarnation. I met with Situ Rinpoche but I worked mostly with Umdze Kale, the senior chant master there. It should be noted that no monastery is thought to be musically "superior" (although, to give a Western perspective, Sherab Ling won the 2003 Grammy for Best Traditional World Music Album).



**Figure 8. Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India**

I listened to a great deal of recordings of Tibetan Buddhist ritual music (CDs), as listed in the Bibliography. I also recorded brief excerpts of both vocal and instrumental

music at Tashi Jong Monastery, near Sherab Ling. It should be noted that Tashi Jong is of the Drukpa (*'brug pa*) Kagyu tradition, slightly different than Karma Kagyu. I admit that my “recording session” was staged, although I am grateful to the monks who quickly assembled the session. However, I was not able to collect as much information as I hoped. Further, I regret not spending more time observing actual pujas. I did view several Mahakala pujas at Sherab Ling, and various performances during the ISP period, but I cannot consider anything a consistent effort to study the pujas in person.

I was originally unsure whether I would be able to meet H.H. the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, but I was able to make an appointment with astonishing ease. The audience was semi-private – two other students and I met the Karmapa and asked our respective questions. The meeting was both informative and personally fulfilling. You have to meet him to truly appreciate his presence and importance.

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### *Websites*

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<http://www.kagyuooffice.org/>

### *Audio*

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H.H. the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa. Mahakala. CD. Recorded 1 June 1996, Tsurphu Monastery, Tibet.

H.H. the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa. Sweet melody of Joyful Aspiration. CD.

Lama Khenno. calling the Guru from Afar. CD. Ngedon Oselling Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal.

The Monks of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery. Relative Sound of the Ultimate. CD. Sherab Ling Records, 2003.

The Monks of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery. Sacred Buddhist Chant. CD.

### *Figures*

**Figure 1:** "Butter lamp offering".

<http://www.tibetan treasures.com/tthtml/ttmerch/teaching%20pages/lamp teaching.htm>

**Figure 5:** "His Eminence the 12th Situ Rinpoche (left) offers an empowerment to His Holiness the 17th and current Gyalwa Karmapa" from Michel Martin, *Music in the Sky* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2003).

**Figure 6:** "Painting of Milarepa". [http://www.kagyü-asia.com/l\\_im\\_milarepa34.html](http://www.kagyü-asia.com/l_im_milarepa34.html)

All other figures photographed by the author between 11 November and 7 December, 2009.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

While conducting research, I realized that the study of any aspect of Tibetan Buddhist ritual music demands a great deal of additional training and time. Several monks who I spoke with suggested that, in order to truly learn about the various chants, I should learn the actual prayers and melodies. Although perhaps feasible, such a project does not lend itself to a month-long project like an ISP.

So, I had to abandon my initial hope of conducting a musical analysis of old and new ritual melodies – but don't let that stop anyone from trying! It may be interesting to explore the interaction and relationship between the instrumental and vocal music as well. I chose not to focus on the instrumental aspect of ritual music, but there are many fascinating things to learn about the ensemble – the instruments themselves (symbolism, significance), musical analysis, education and training, etc.

I spoke briefly with several of my sources about the younger generations of monks, specifically with regards to their exposure to global secular music. There is a Westerner at Sherab Ling who gives world music lessons to the monks, including a popular drum kit class. Situ Rinpoche told me that he enjoys listening to Western genres that are “human” – gospel, reggae, and soft rock (e.g. “Let It Be” by the Beatles). It might be interesting to explore themes related to secular music in the monastic community.



**Figure 9. The author (left) conducting research in an audience with His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa (2nd from right)**