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Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders: Instrumental Music and Creativity in Tibetan Buddhist Ritual

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SIT Study Abroad

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Figure 1: Waterfall in Dharamsala Valley

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“Filling the sky, earth and the space in between, let passionate melodies, bone trumpets and cymbals resound! ... To give delight to the Protectors of Religion and their followers offer brilliant music, like the roar of a thousand thunders.”[1]

[1] H.H. the 5th Dalai Lama quoted in Terry Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound” (PhD. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979) 677.

Table of Contents

Notes:

'Buddhist' throughout this paper will be used to refer specifically to the Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhists. The author did not study and makes no notes of any of the other Buddhist traditions, schools, or Vehicles.

Tibetan words will be included within the body of the text using the Wylie transliteration method and given again in the Glossary

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Abstract

Tibetan Buddhism has numerous detailed and diverse traditions of ritual music that play an integral part in religious practices. Despite the prominence of such performances in Tibetan Buddhist life, spectators and researchers alike have frequently misunderstood them based purely on physical observation. As a religion that focuses on the cultivation and development of the mind, any analysis focusing only on physical description is significantly flawed. Music in Buddhist practice is at a base level a sound offering. On a higher level, however, it is much more. If done with the proper motivation, musical performance during ritual is a method to wipe away one's own negative Karma and attachment to the realms of desire. Additionally, the traditional field of ritual music and structure is constantly undergoing change and revision in the contemporary context. This paper will examine the structure and role of ritual music in Buddhist performance as well as briefly overview the various instruments and orchestration used during ritual. Finally, it will examine the ongoing variations and changes to Buddhist ritual practice through the different instrumentations, alterations and new compositions that demonstrate how ritual music remains both a traditional and a fluid entity in a constantly changing world.

Introduction:

Music, to most of us born and bred in the West, is generally held to have something to do with sound, rhythm, dynamics and other assorted techniques and terms. To think more specifically of religious music usually evokes images of Gospel choirs, Sufi mystics, Gregorian chanters, or Hindu Kirtans. Indeed, it is generally held as self-evident that deep in musical experience lies something sacred. Many are attracted to the music of the Indian subcontinent with notions of the sacred quality inherent to it. Some are inspired by the stories about the syllable 'OM' as the primordial sound of the universe that pervades, and in fact is all. Others are fascinated more by instruments, such as the 'Tibetan' Singing Bowls or chimes, whose sweet rings are said to express some deeper power beyond words; the sound of the universe.[2] In truth, however, the role of music in Buddhist practice is neither to express primordial reality nor to go beyond verbal expression. Ritual music, both vocal and instrumental, is meant as an offering to the Gods and as a tool in Buddhist spiritual practice.

Instrumental music must be understood in its proper context as a valuable and versatile tool in Buddhist practice but possessing no inherent value of itself. On a lower level of understanding, musical offerings are made to gain merit and remove one's negative karma and as pleasing offerings to the gods. On a higher level, musical offerings serve the purpose of lessening the practitioner's attachment to the material world and to the five senses, helping them break free from the cyclical existence in the realms of desire and attachment.

Additionally, music both instrumental and otherwise as performed in ritual is not a static entity that remains without change in time immemorial. Instead, texts and compositions are undergoing constant revision and constant publication as masters, such as H.H. the Karmapa compose and make public works inspired by profound meditative insight.

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[2] The Singing Bowls are not in fact, to the extent of my experience and those with whom I spoke, used in Tibetan Buddhist practice but were rather fashioned to market to foreign tourists.

Thus, the music of Tibetan ritual is something that is both traditional and contemporary, with roots both in the past and present. The meaning, however, of all music and creative work in Buddhist ultimately come down to one thing: the motivation inspiring the actions of the performers, musicians, composers, and artists. Still, before delving into creative works, it is necessary first to explore the role and components of ritual in Buddhist practice, as well as to briefly explore the instruments and orchestration that captures the vast majority of ritual music and musicians.

The Role of Buddhist Ritual Music in Practice

The earliest Westerners who journeyed to Tibet portrayed a demon worshiping people whose practice of devil worship was abhorred by the 'civilized' Europeans. Held as evidence for such practice was the use of Tantric instruments, such as the thighbone trumpet, skull drum, and offerings of blood and alcohol, for example. Additionally, the low growling chants and loud blaring horns produced a chaotic mixture of sounds that was, and still is today, found both intriguing and terrifying at the same time. Today, the display of musical instruments is still usually one of the first things that non-Tibetans encounter when they begin journeys into the Tantric Buddhist world. While, most past notions of devil worship have been left behind for more accurate understandings of Buddhist philosophy and practice, there is nevertheless the danger of making assumptions about the role of music in ritual based upon its role in the countries that we come from.

With such a stark presence in ritual and observational practice, the purpose of music in Tibetan Buddhist practice can easily be misconstrued and misunderstood. Many have cited lines of particular past masters, for example, regarding the importance of music. For instance, in the great Sakya classic, *Kun dga' bsod nams* it is stated that "When (the deity) had departed, Kun mkhan Chen po thought: 'those completely pure musical performances of the Sa skya pas are more beneficial that a hundred years of meditation and a hundred years

of mantra recitations!'"[3] Indeed, the author also perceived music to be immensely important to Buddhist ritual, thus embarking on this quest to learn more.

How sobering it was to be told that Buddhists do not hold music to have any inherent value in religious practice![4] Indeed, one monk, the headmaster of a secondary monastic school, looked at me and rolled his eyes when I explained my project to him. He further explained that I was only one in a long line of Westerners who come expecting to learn about music, which is not very important. Music, he explained, is only a tool to be discarded when its purpose has been served. Just as gas, a stove, utensils and cookware are tools used to cook food, but serve no purpose in the physical nourishment of the human body, so too is music to be used only as an instrument in practice.[5] Enlightenment does not come through musical expressions, but through taming one's mind and generating compassion towards others. So, if music is a tool, the next question arises: how is this tool to be used? Music is used as an offering to the gods, to oneself, and to all sentient beings; to lessen their sensual desires and attachments to the fallacies of samsaric existence.

Primarily, music is a *mchod pa* or offering and instrumental music, in particular, is a *snyan pa* or aural offering. Just as water, rice, cloth, incense and tormas (*gtor ma*) are offered in rituals as pleasing offerings to the five senses, so too is music offered as pleasing to the ears. The music used in any particular ritual differs as befits the deity at the focus of the practice, for example, depending on characteristics such as wrathfulness and peacefulness. Here a misconception can arise regarding the purpose of an *offering* in Buddhist practice. Deities, as perfectly awakened Buddhas, have no need for offerings as a king demanding tribute would. Thus, instead of offerings to already perfected beings, musical and other offerings are really made to the practitioner who gives them.

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[3] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound" (PhD. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979) 112.
[4] Khenpo Lungrik Singhe, interview by author, Bir Dirru Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.
[5] Karma Wangyal, interview by author, Palyul Chökhorling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.

As a monk visualizes himself as a deity during ritual, he presents offerings to the deity he has become to lessen the non-enlightened practitioner's desire and attachment to the five sense sensations.[6] Thus, music and other offerings are methods used to lessen the attachment of monks to sensational objects and to the physical world on their path to non-attachment and Enlightenment. Ultimately, it is not the music in itself that has worth but the thoughts and motivation of the monks performing it. Without the proper motivation and internal contemplation, ritual music is of no use; it is just mindless noise.[7]

Instrumental music therefore, serves a dual purpose in Buddhist ritual, as a time for meditation and as a *snyan pa* or sound offering. The periods during ritual when instrumental music are played are used by monks to contemplate the preceding section of text and to do visualizations and other practices as specified in individual pujas (Tibetan: *mchod*).[8] Thus, these musical interludes are important as times for the actual practice of an individual ritual to occur. On another level, instrumental music is meant as a sound offering, as described above, which on a low level of understanding is to please the gods and on a higher to lesson the practitioner's own attachment to the sensational world. If done with the proper motivation, such offerings clear away the musicians' negative karma and gain him/her merit. By accumulating good merit and removing negative karma, the performance of music is a useful tool on the path to Enlightenment, as the absence of negative karma is a sign of an Enlightened being.[9]

Figure 2 Prayer Flags offered as an offering

[6] Lama Rinchen, interview by author, Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

It should also be noted that the benefits of musical offerings, whether understood as pleasing to the gods, tools to remove one's negative karma and help one gain merit, or lessen attachment to the phenomenal world, are not limited in their benefit to monks alone. Anyone can perform music as an offering so long as it is done with the proper motivation to generate merit and compassion towards all sentient beings. Thus, whether a person is monastic or lay and regardless of whether they play jazz, classical music, or rock and roll, any music can be an offering.[10,11]

Ritual Structure and Meaning

All Buddhist rituals share a similar structure, consisting of three basic parts. First, all pujas begin with some sort of invocation where monks take refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (Tibetan: *dkon mchog kun 'dus gsum*). During this part the purpose of the particular puja is expressed along with the promise that it will be performed for the benefit of all sentient beings. The second component is the main body of the puja text. This is unique unto each puja and pertains to a particular deity or deities with a specific purpose. Thus, it is usually the longest part of any performance. To conclude, all pujas end with a dedication of the merit accumulated during their performance to all sentient beings.[12]

Another common puja structure given consists of seven parts that correspond to the Seven Limb Offering. This breakdown begins a ritual with paying homage to a deity or Buddha and praising her/his sacred qualities. Next, offerings of pleasant things, in particular the five sense offerings are presented to the focus of the ritual. Thirdly, practitioners confess any sins accumulated, followed by a period of admiring and rejoicing in the merit of

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[10] Ibid.
Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche Shedrub Nyima, interview by author, Khampagar Monastery, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India, 25 April 2011.

[11] While both monks and lay gain merit from sound offerings, it is not considered equal. Due to monks' monastic vows, they are set apart from other people and believed to gain more than twice the merit of laypersons through their actions.

[12] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.

others. Practitioners next exhort and request the deity to turn the Wheel of Dharma and give teachings in addition to keeping their Bodhisattva (Tibetan: *byang chub sems dpa*) vow to remain within cyclical existence for the benefit of others until all sentient beings have reached Enlightenment. Finally, the puja concludes with a dedication of all merit generated during its performance to all sentient beings.[13]

The main purpose of any puja, regardless of to whom it is dedicated or its duration, is to aid monks in their contemplation of the important Buddhist concepts of Emptiness and Compassion. It is important for monks to keep proper motivation and their focus on Emptiness and benefit for all sentient beings throughout a puja lest their mind wander and lose any merit accumulated. Pungri Tulku notes that if a monk loses their single-pointed mindfulness and lets his mind wander and become noisy, he will lose all merit, motivation, dedication and refuge and the ritual will be for naught.[14]

Various practices are taught and incorporated into puja practice to keep monks focused on these two concepts. For example, Lama Rinchen at Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery notes that all rituals there begin with the recitation and meditation of the syllables *Ram Yam Kam*, which respectively refer to fire, wind, and water. Fire is used to burn down obstacles or impurities, wind disperses the ashes, and water purifies the mind. This is necessary, he further explains, because if a person desires to fill a space with something it is necessary first to clear out what is already there.[15] In other words, before a monk can concentrate fully on Compassion and Emptiness they must first clean their mind of all impurities and noisy thoughts, which can inhibit their practice. Once they have 'burned' away such thoughts they will have an empty space to be filled, so to speak. In this state, as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with contemplations of Compassion and Emptiness, a monk should remain in throughout the course of any ritual, devoid of all extraneous thoughts and maintaining single-pointed concentration.

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[13] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 368-369.
[14] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[15] Lama Rinchen, interview by author, Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.

Variations in Ritual Performance

When asked for the number and frequency of pujas performed at his monastery, one monk responded with a barked laugh, a wide sweep if his hands and the words "So many!"[16] The description of a vast number of individual rituals is the not the purpose of this paper but it should be noted that quite a wide variety exists in the ways rituals are practiced within the Buddhist community. The frequency and choice of pujas depends on a number of descending factors that begin with which Buddhist school a monk belongs to, which lineage he follows, which individual monastery he lives in and finally his personal practice.

The type of monastery significantly impacts the rituals carried out in terms of their frequency, performance, and focus. A Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) monastery, for example, is less likely to use instrumentation to the extent which musical instruments are used in Kagyü (*bka'-brgyud)* rituals. Additionally, a monastery that focuses on Buddhist philosophy as opposed to Tantra is likely to conduct rituals less frequently and with fewer musical instruments accompanying the performance. Kirti Monastery in McLeod Ganj, for example, as a monastery of philosophical studies conducts fewer pujas and employs less instrumental ornamentation than its neighbors Nechung Monastery, which is home to the Tibetan State Oracle, or Namgyal Monastery, the monastery of H.H. the Dalai Lama.[17]

For a concrete example of how these descending factors play into an individual monk's ritual practice, take the practice of Ven. Pungri Tulku Rinpoche. He is first a Karma Kagyü (*kar ma bka' brgyud*) Buddhist, a subset of the Kagyü School, and as such practices in the Karma Kagyü tradition. Within the Karma Kagyü, he is a follower of H.E. the 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche, the head of the Palpung Lineage, and therefore gives special attention to the particulars of teachings and practices within this Lineage. Thirdly, he is a resident of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery and follows the puja and practice schedule of this monastery. Lastly, he is also a Tulku (*sprul sku*) or reincarnate teacher, and therefore has

[16] Tupten, interview by author, Gyuto Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India, 20 April 2011.
[17] Anonymous, interview with the author, Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 18 April 2011.

individual practices, which are separate from those done within the Karma Kagyü, Palpung Lineage, or by other monks at Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery.[18]

Pujas can also be classified with regard to their frequency of occurrence as some are performed more often than others. Certain pujas are recited daily in monasteries for one to two hours in the morning and evening. Others, which tend to be longer, are said once a month. The most special rituals, however, occur once each year or even less frequently and can last up to a week.[19] Yearly pujas generally have a specific purpose and are performed certain times of the year that correspond to their purpose. For example, a long puja for Mahakala (Tibetan: *mgon po nag po*) is performed once a year at Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery near the end of the Tibetan calendar year. The purpose of this particular puja, lasting nearly a week, is to clear away all obstacles and hindrances in the coming year.[20]

Instrumentation and Orchestration of Ritual

While Tibetan Buddhist ritual music may sound quite chaotic, it is in fact highly regulated with an organized structure. The term *rol mo* refers to several aspects of Buddhist music including: instrumental music, a particular variety of cymbals used in ritual (see below), as well as the player of cymbals who leads the monastic ritual performance. All rituals are lead by the *dbu mdzad*, who is an expert in Buddhist ritual and performance. The ensemble of musicians can be divided along different lines, but the most common and traditional categorization of musical instruments in Tibet divides instruments by the way they are played between *brdung ba* (beaten), *'khrol ba* (rung), *'bud pa* (blown) and *rgyu rkyen* (stringed). All of these categories are represented in Buddhist instrumental ensemble except stringed instruments, although these may be included as mental offerings.[21]

The following pages will attempt a brief explanation of role of the *dbu mdzad* as well as some of the more prevalent instruments used in rituals witnessed by the author.

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[18] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 549.

Nevertheless, it should by no means be considered an exhaustive list as there are numerous other instruments used in ritual not included here. The instrumentation as part of the overall performance of rituals varies from school to school and monastery to monastery.

Dbu Mdzad

The leader of all monks during any ritual is the *dbu mdzad*, a title that can be understood to mean Chant or Ritual Master. The *dbu mdzad* is the normally the lead instrumentalist as well the lead vocalist in any ritual ensemble and is chosen for his knowledge of texts, his skill in performance, his leadership, and most importantly for his good voice.[22] He is foremost responsible to know all of the chants and instrumental music performed at a monastery, including daily pujas as well as those less frequently held. This means that a *dbu mdzad* must know how to perform pujas ranging from one hour to more than one week in length. As (nearly) every orchestra has a conductor, the *dbu mdzad* similarly acts as the conductor and orchestrator of all ritual performances. Unlike an orchestral conductor, however, the *dbu mdzad* takes an active part in rituals, leading both the vocal and instrumental sections with his own performance.

The position of *dbu mdzad* is considered a prestigious position within a monastery as well as one of great responsibility.[23] He must direct the ritual performance, keeping it at the proper speed and transitioning between sections of chanting and instrumentation, as well as know the order and lead the various prayers of a particular ritual. Most of such direction is done vocally through singing various bridge sections and instrumentally through cadences on the *rol mo* During a puja it is often the case that all of the musicians eyes remain fixed on the *dbu mdzad*, watching him for direction. Those who cannot see him listen for his cymbals to give directions on tempo and dynamics. Further, it is the *dbu mdzad'*s job to

[22] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.
[23] Following Ellingson, who analyzed the organizational structure of monasteries in terms of Adibuddha (Tibetan: *Dang po'i sangs rgyas)*, or the Primordial Buddha, who is self-originating and present through Mind, Speech and Body. The Mind manifestation, the most important in a Monastery, is the Abbot (Tibetan: *mkhan po*), the Speech manifestation, the second most important is the *dbu mdzad* and the Body manifestation are the various administrative staff that work in the office and kitchen.

correct any mistakes and keep all musicians on track. On multiple occasions I witnessed drummers who for whatever reason had gotten offbeat get back to the proper rhythm and sit up a little straighter after a sharp glance or gesture from the *dbu mdzad.*

Due to the responsibility as well as the benefits[24], the position of *dbu mdzad* is often highly desired among monks. Many of the younger monks practice both in and outside of rituals, working on their vocal qualities as well as their skill in instrumental performance and knowledge of texts. Those lucky enough to be selected for training, either by the monastery's senior monks or by popular vote of all ordained monks, are given special lessons and responsibilities by the acting *dbu mdzad*. For example, as Tsechokling Monastery in McLeod Ganj there are currently three monks training for the position of *dbu mdzad.* One of their responsibilities witnessed by the author was to play or voice the bridging sections in a puja and the keep the tempo during chanting sections. The performance of these musical sections was shared between the *dbu mdzad* and the three apprentices, one apprentice performing during one interlude, the next performing during the next, and so forth. While they were playing the three watched the *dbu mdzad* who performed the motions necessary for the proper playing of *rol mo*, only without a pair in his hands. In other words, they mimicked his actions.

Another responsibility of the *dbu mdzad* as well as his students is to teach music and chanting to the younger monks at a monastery. At Tsechokling, for example, one of the *dbu mdzad* in training gives *rgya gling* and *dung chen* (see below) lessons to a group of twelve younger monks. These lessons took place on Friday afternoon in the woods a good distance away from the monastery. This allows the monks to improve their ability on sacred instruments in a spot where it will not bother laypersons or other monks. It also gave the monks time to goof off with only minor supervision of elder students.[25]

[24] The position brings, among other things, respect, a raised seat during rituals and often financial rewards.
[25] Yeshe, interview by author, Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 15 April 2011.

Brdung ba

Beaten instruments are classified as those played by percussion, striking the instrument with an external agent, or by concussion, striking the instrument with a part of itself. Some of the most common instruments used are described below.

Rol mo – Cymbals

Rol mo are the most important instruments used during Buddhist ritual. They are most often played by the *dbu mdzad* and lead all of the other instruments in the ensemble.

Figure 3 *sil snyan* at Tsechokling Monastery

During certain rituals they can be played by a large number of the assembled monks who will follow the lead of the *dbu mdzad* and play during larger musical interludes. When played alone by the *dbu mdzad*, they are played primarily to keep the tempo during chanting as well as to perform various solo instrumental interludes and cadences which lead into further sections of instrumental or vocal music.[26]

There are two types of cymbals commonly used during rituals, the *rol mo* also called *sbub 'chal*, and the *sil snyan*. *Rol mo* are large, nearly flat cymbals with a raised hemispheric dome in the middle. Primarily played during rituals for peaceful deities, they are held horizontally and played with vertical strokes. *Sil snyan* are more sloped, conical shaped cymbals played primarily in rituals for wrathful deities. Unlike the *rol mo*, *sil snyan* are held vertically and played with horizontal strokes.

There are a wide variety of playing techniques used while playing, the most common of which are single stroke crashes and rebound strokes.[27] Rebound strokes are when the cymbals are allowed to hit as if on a clock at six o'clock, at twelve, at six, and so forth. The

[26] During rituals attended by the author, as few and as many as twenty *rol mo* played at once. The number is dependent on the puja as well as the monastery.
[27] Term 'Rebound' borrowed from Ellingson, "The Mandala of Soundm" 585.

momentum of the cymbal strike combined with the loose grip of the player allows the cymbal's kinetic energy to continue reverberating, letting the cymbal strikes accelerate and decrescendo until they come together with a buzz and a final crash. Other techniques include playing in a figure eight style, striking both the back and front side of the cymbals, and sliding the edges along each other. During one conversation I with the *dbu mdzad* at Tsechokling after a puja, the only way I could describe his beautiful playing was to say it appeared his cymbals were dancing. To this he laughed and nodded in agreement.[28]

Rnga – Drums

Rnga are considered the easiest type of instrument to play and largely follow the *rol mo* during the performance of ritual. Many types of *rnga* exist, the most common of which have two heads mounted on a frame or a pole. Most have natural or green dyed drumheads and are a red color, decorated with various floral and animal designs. The primary job of *rnga* during ritual is to follow and reinforce the rhythm played by the cymbals. Therefore, their performance closely resembles that of the *rol mo* in rhythm and dynamics; *rnga* are often used along with *rol mo* to keep the tempo and quite frequently perform accelerating rhythm culminating in loud resounding strikes, similar to the rebound technique used by *rol mo* players. Considered by far to be the easiest to learn, one monk with whom I spoke even said that there is no formal training necessary. A young monk need only observe a ritual two or three times and then keep a close eye on the *dbu mdzad*.[29]

Figure 4 *Rnga* at Tsechokling Monastery

Chos rnga are drums mounted on sticks or poles and held by the player, the bottom of the stick either resting on the floor or the

[28] Umdze Tenzin Thendup, interview by author, Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 21 April 2011.
[29] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.

players lap depending on the size of the drum. They are played with flexible sickle shaped sticks with cloth-wrapped ends, which bounce off the drumhead when struck thus creating an especially resonant and rich sound. In performances *chos rgna* are played in multiples of two. The largest number played simultaneously witnessed by this author was eight, but it is probable that more are played depending on the size of a monastery.

Rnga chem or large drums are often mounted on decorated square frames. They are played with one or two straight sticks, which are shorter and thicker that those used to play *chos rgna*. Typically also played in twos, the author never witnessed more than two being played at once, but again this is likely dependent on the size on a monastery and the ritual being performed.

Similar to the *rnga chem* are *rnga chen* which are also frame mounted drums, only much larger. These are often mounted on temple roofs or housed in the upper floors of a monastery temple and are used to call the monks to pujas.[30]

Mkhar rnga

Mkhar rnga are bronze gongs used occasionally in rituals and most frequently to call monks to assemble, as a puja is about to begin.[31] While I never witnessed this instrument being used during rituals, at Tsechokling it is used along with the *dung dkar* (see below) to call monks to assemble before a puja begins.

Da ma ru

The hourglass drum or *da ma ru* can be considered either a *brdung ba* or a *'khrol ba* instrument based on its construction and method of playing. Here it will be considered a *brdung ba* due to the nature how it is played, by concussion, as well as the sound it produces, which bears a closer resemblance to *brdung ba* instruments such as *rgna* than *'khrol ba* instruments, such as the *dril bu* (see below).

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[30] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 556.
[31] Ibid., 557.

The *da ma ru* is constructed in the shape of an hourglass either from two human skulls, or more commonly today, from wood.[32] Its use is reserved primarily for the *mkhan po, dbu mdzad* or another senior monk to play during instrumental sections. Players oscillate their wrists, causing two strikers suspended by cords to hit both sides of the drum in alternation and creating a steadily beating, high pitched, hollow sound. It is not very loud but due to its contrast in pitch and rhythm with the other instruments played, it can normally be heard quite distinctly through the other sounds.

'khrol ba

Rung instruments are classified as those that are played with one or more suspended strikers. They often play regular beats of a steady tone and thus contrast the varying rhythms of *brdung ba* and the changing melodies of *'bud pa*.

Dril bu and rdo rje

Also known as the bell and the vajra, these two instruments are only ever played together. The reason, as one monk described it is that "just as a home is not balanced without both a wife and a husband, so too is a ritual not balanced or correct if only the *dril bu* and not *rdo rje* are used," or vice versa.[33] The *dril bu* is made from alloys of five precious metals, mostly using the lost wax technique of casting.[34] The flaring part of the bell is often highly decorated and the handle is formed in the shape of half a *rdo rje*. Normally only the *mkhan po*, *dbu mdzad*, or another senior monk play these instruments, however in some instances all fully ordained monks participating in a ritual will play them. In some rituals, witnessed by the author, the *dril bu* and *rdo rje* were the only instruments used to accompany the chanting of a particular puja. As with most aspects of ritual, Geshe Dorji Damdul, a translator for H.H. the Dalai Lama, states "it depends on the norms of the particular community."[35] Thus, there is no clear-cut definition of who can play which

[32] Ibid., 559.
[33] Anonymous, interview with the author, Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 18 April 2011.
[34] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 560.
[35] Geshe Dorji Damdul, email message to Author, 28 April 2011.

instrument and who cannot. Such things are dependent on the decisions made by the leadership and the traditions of each individual monastery, lineage, and school.

The *dril bu* is symbolic of the female element and of wisdom, "which symbolizes the ultimate reality of everything."[36] The high and clear pitch produced by the *dril bu* is audibly discernable from the low pitches of the majority of other instruments used in Buddhist ritual making it easy to hear, if somewhat difficult to locate in the often-vast musical ensembles. It is played with the bell facing downward and held in the left hand of the player. By alternating or gently twisting the wrist back an forth a regular and steady ringing tone is produced, which like the *da ma ru* can normally be heard clearly through the cymbals, drums, and melodic instruments used. A quick flick of the wrist at the end of a musical interlude produces a short burst of sound, marking the end of a particular section.

The *rdo rje* alternately, symbolizes the male element and the method on the path to Enlightenment. To observers not familiar with Buddhist ritual the *rdo rje* appears to be a ritual tool rather than a musical instrument. However, let not the eyes be deceiving. While it may make no sound on this plane of existence, its sound is believed to be clearly audible to the gods.[37]

Figure 5 *Dril bu and Rdo rje* at Tsechokling Monastery

The *dril bu* and *rdo rje* are always used together as reminders of the inseparability of wisdom and method in Buddhist practice. Their use, even by one person, serves as a constant reminder to all assembled to keep their minds concentrated both in and outside of ritual on these ideas. Thus, despite being musical instruments they are also tools to help monks' meditations and spiritual practice. Still, there are other accepted interpretations of their meaning.

[36] Ibid.
[37] Tupten, interview by author, Gyuto Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India, 20 April 2011.

One monk noted that the *dril bu* and *rdo rje* symbolize inner strength and effort. The Buddha Shakyamuni (Tibetan: *sangs rgyas sprul sku*) himself, he further explained, possessed these qualities perfectly. We, however, do not and thus the *dril bu* and *rdo rje* are used as reminders to us of these two conditions.[38] Another explanation from H.E. the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche describes the *dril bu* and *rdo rje* as symbolic of Emptiness and Compassion, the two qualities monks should always be focused on during any ritual performance. H.E. further explains that the various ritual instruments are always played in pairs of multiples of two to symbolize these two qualities and therefore it is never found that in puja only one drum or one horn are played.[39,40] Thus, even the number of musicians used in a puja has meaning. Like other aspects of ritual, the number of musical instruments played serves as a reminder to monks of the good qualities they should be generating both within ritual performances and during their daily lives.

'bud pa

'bud pa or blown instruments are classified as those played by passing air from a player's mouth through the body of an instrument. These instruments are always played in pairs so that the sound of an offering will remain constant unless noted and to symbolize Compassion and Emptiness. They are also the only instruments used in Buddhist ritual that play melodic rather than purely rhythmic music. In general, there are two types of wind instruments classified by their method of performing melodies. The first, to borrow a term from Ellingson, play tone-contour or slurred melodies, which means that pitches are arrived at without pausing through changes in the embouchure and without sharp distinctions of

[38] Anonymous, interview with the author, Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 18 April 2011.
[39] His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche Shedrub Nyima, interview by author, Khampagar Monastery, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India, 25 April 2011.
[40] Another explanation for the use of multiples of two in blown instruments is that there will be no interruption in the musical offering when a player must pause for a breath. Unless specified in a ritual's musical compositions, a pause would be considered a mistake and therefore unpleasing to the gods and an obstacle in the other monks' meditative practices.

pitch.[41] The second type, while not pausing for breaths between notes, play distinct and separate pitches altered through different fingerings of notes.

Dung dkhar

The conch, or *dung dkhar* is exactly what its name suggests; a conch shell that is played through an attached metal mouthpiece. The mouthpiece is inserted into a hole in the spiral of a shell and is often decorated with various engravings and precious stones. It can range in size from a small mouthpiece plate to one covering a significant part of the conch shell. The *dung dkhar,* in spite of its wide spread use in most monasteries, is considered quite rare and therefore highly valued in monastic ritual. A likely cause of such high regard in ritual is that historically all conch shells had to be brought to Tibet from India and therefore were rare by virtue of the long journey necessary to physically bring them into Tibet. Further, a clockwise turning spiral is considered especially valuable, as these are even more rare than the normal counter-clockwise turning variety.[42]

The *dung dkhar* is primarily used in rituals to summon peaceful deities and is not considered particularly difficult to learn as it has only a limited repertoire of melodies that are primarily used. This author, however, only witnessed its other common use, which is to summon monks to ritual. At Tsechokling, immediately before a ritual was about to begin, two young monks would stand outside the front door of the main temple and play continuous sounds on the *dung dkhar* to announce the commencement of a ritual.

Rkang gling

Considered as evidence that Tibetans were indeed devil worshippers by early European explorers, the thighbone trumpet or *rkang gling* is a Tantric instrument that is mostly used in the worship or wrathful deities. Played in pairs like other *'bud pa*, the *rkang gling* performs mostly short, simple slurred melodies. During ritual it is often the primary high-pitched melodic instrument used, although this is not necessarily the case when it is

[41] Terry Ellingson, "Mandala of Sound", 564.
[42] Ibid., 565.

played with the *rgya gling* (see below). In some ritual traditions, such as the Kagyü, these two instruments will never be played simultaneously while in others there are no such prohibitions.[43] Thus its use, like most aspect of ritual, is largely defined by the context of which school and monastery it is used in.

Rkang gling are traditionally made of human thighbones (hence the assumptions and aversions of early explorers) from persons considered especially virtuous, heinous, or victims of violent crimes.[44] Today, however, it is also quite common to construct *rkang gling* out of copper, brass, or other metals.[45] Commonly decorated with silk ribbons, the *rkang gling* has a high and bright tone, making it discernable from the lower tones of the *dung chen* and more shrill timbre of the *rgya gling*. The short length of the *rkang gling* makes its pitch easily to manipulate with subtle changes of the embouchure, perhaps most similar to the slight changes used while playing the French horn.

Dung chen

The long horn or *dung chen*, along with the *rol mo*, is the most characteristic and widely recognized of the instruments used in Buddhist ritual. To an American or European, it may on first glance resemble a straight-barreled Alp horn that is quite dark in color and adorned with several sections of metalwork and engravings. Most *dung chen* are telescoping, with three parts, making them manageable to transport in and out of the main temple or to the roof, where they are commonly played to welcome high Lamas and Rinpoches to a monastery or temple. Inside of the temple, *dung chen* are most commonly played with the flaring bells elevated via the use of a small wooden frame. When played outside of temples, as occurs during processions or festivals, *dung chen* are normally carried by two or three people along with the musician, depending upon their size.

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[43] Ibid., 566.
[44] Ibid., 567.
[45] *Rkang gling* as well as other instruments used in ritual are not commonly constructed by monks themselves, but rather by persons trained as metal smiths or instrument makers. Lay craftsmen construct the instruments and give them to monks to be tested before a transaction is complete. As one monk told me, craftsmen know how to make the instruments but only monks know how they should sound when played.
Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.

The *dung chen* is the melodic instrument most often used in ritual, the frequency of use of *rkang gling, rgya gling, and dung dkhar* all being somewhat less. With the widest range (three octaves) of any melodic instrument, the *dung chen* primarily makes use of three pitches. Low blares are often what begin (usually three) and end (usually one) musical interludes, changing often to a middle toned pitch, which is most often held longest during instrumental sections. A higher pitch is also used on occasion. Played through a shallow mouthpiece similar in diameter to that of a tuba or trombone mouthpiece, it is played by passing air through compressed lips.[46]

Rgya Gling

The only melodic instrument to be played using discrete pitches changed through a variation in finger positions, the *rgya gling* is truly unique in the Tibetan ritual ensemble. Although a great deal of the literature categorizes the *rgya gling* in the Euro-American

Figure 6 A Modern Oboe (L) and a Bombarde (R) from Wikipedia Commons

Figure 7 *Rgya gling* at Tsechokling Monastery

[46] With a background playing trumpet and French horn, the author's own attempts to play the *dung chen* were quite successful albeit non completely. The low blares, most characteristic of this instrument, are exceedingly difficult to play with such a shallow mouthpiece. It was comforting, however, when the monks teaching said that they too find the low pitch to be the most difficult to play and master.

musical ensemble as an oboe, I would argue that the similarities in structure as well as performing technique resemble much closer that of a Bombarde, played in Brittany (see above pictures). The basic structure consists of a cylindrical tube with seven holes bored into it. At the bottom is an attached metal bell, which flares out somewhat, and at the top end is a metal disc against which the mouth is pressed. Atop the metal disc is a small tube over which a reed in inserted. The double reed is traditionally made of some sort of marsh grass or reed, although today other modern materials are in use. For example, at Tsechokling Monastery the monks use a reed that is made from a modified plastic straw that is not as resonant as harder reeds but is considerably easier to play.

The instrument is played similar to a bombarde by putting the mouth completely over the reed and passing air through the open reed. Unlike an oboe, the mouth does not make contact with the vibrating cane part of the reed only the base section. Additionally, the most difficult aspect of playing the *rgya gling* is that (ideally) no breaths are taken but rather the tone is continuous during instrumental interludes with the aid of circular breathing. This technique, commonly first practiced by young monks by blowing into a glass of water through a straw, uses the cheeks as reservoirs where air is stored while the player breaths. While inhaling through the nose the player uses his/her cheek muscles to push the air stored in the cheeks out through the mouth, thus preserving the sound. Quickly after inhaling the player supplements the limited reservoir in the cheeks with newly inhaled air. It is a difficult concept to convey on paper or

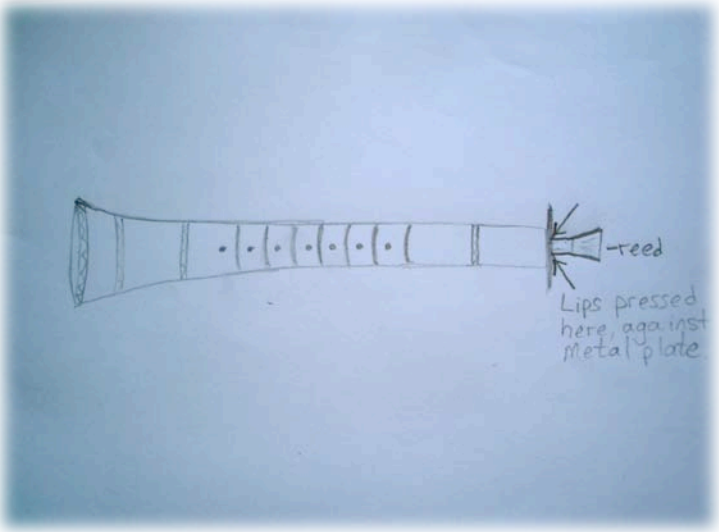

Figure 8 Diagram of *rgya gling*

to perform, and monks must become experts to be able to continuously, often play for considerable lengths of time during ritual performances.[47]

Other Instruments

There are numerous other instruments used on occasion in Buddhist ritual, which have not been included here. The previous descriptions are largely a result of the author's personal witness during ritual and private instruction on the performance of these instruments. Various gongs, chimes, smaller cymbals and hand held drums are used on occasion in monastic ritual elsewhere. Instead attempting a of description of all the possible instruments used in every Buddhist school and monastery, an overview of those shared by all schools that are most commonly used was given.

History of the Instruments

There are numerous theories as to where the instruments used in Buddhist ritual today originated. While nothing can be said with certainty, it is extremely likely that many of the instruments were introduced to Tibet from the outside world. The main outside source for musical instruments as well as Buddhist teachings to Tibet is believed to be India. Beginning perhaps sometime before the 8th century, but certainly during and after the time of Guru Padmasambhava (*gu ru pad ma 'byung gnas*) who was reported to be a great vocal

[47] Having the opportunity to take several lessons on the *rgya gling*, I found it had numerous similarities to my primary instrument, the Great Highland Bagpipe. Besides the obvious structural similarities between the bagpipe chanter and the *rgya gling*, there are more subtle similarities with the tone and culture of playing. For example, the sound on both instruments is considered to be best and have the brightest tone when the reeds are hard. In both communities of musicians players often try to outperform each other, playing reeds of harder material or cutting off the tips of a reed to make it shorter and more difficult to play. Another similarity is that *rgya gling* players first learn to play on a simple wooden flute with the same fingering and tuning as an Irish whistle. With minor exceptions, this is the same fingering that is used on to play a Highland Bagpipe.
Some of the differences apparent, however, are that the *rgya gling* has seven holes, while the Highland Pipe has seven on the front and one on the under side. *Rgya gling* players also play with their left hand on the bottom, keeping their pinky underneath the instrument or on the bottom hole and using their middle three fingers to cover the bottom holes. Their right middle three cover the top. Bagpipes, on the other hand, normally play with their right hand on the bottom using their pinky and three middle fingers to play with their left three middle fingers and thumb covering the three holes and under side hole on the top of the chanter.

and instrumental musician, Vajrayana Buddhist culture as it was practiced in India began to be introduced to Tibet through translators and great teachers who along with texts brought tools, such as musical instruments, used in Buddhist ritual. It is likely that these instruments combined with those native to Tibet to form a significant portion of the modern ritual music ensemble.

Based on his research and the writings of the Indian Buddhist master Candragomin (7th century), Ellingson believes that the conch, certain drums, cymbals, and various Tantric instruments entered Tibetan culture with the arrival of Tantric Buddhist practices from India. These, he writes, mixed with the Bön (*bon*) tradition native to Tibet,[48] which contributed instruments such as the *dril bu*, frame drum, gong, *sbub chal* and *dung chen* to Buddhist ritual practice. Later, other instruments from China (various types of gongs) and Persia (the *rgya gling*) entered to form the modern repertoire of musical instruments.[49] While these conclusions may not be completely factual, Ellingson is certainly correct in stating that most of the instruments used today in Tibetan ritual came from outside of Tibet.

Finding no source that outright refuted Ellingson's explanations, the author did discover an alternate explanation from monastics that, while not being scholarly, is worthwhile to include. The traditional explanation in monastic education is that the various musical instruments came from the gods themselves through the contemplations of high Lamas. As highly realized persons performed visualization meditation on various deities, it is believed they were transported to the realms of those particular deities. There, they witnessed retinues of gods bearing offerings to the deities. Among the various offerings are musical instruments, which are believed to have inspired Lamas to create the instruments that they saw. Such visions are still believed to occur today to realized Lamas and Rinpoches. As Pungri Tulku explains, human ritual offerings are imitations of those proffered

[48] Whether *bon* truly existed during the 7th century as an organized religion like it does today or was a rather a mixture of various indigenous practices is still highly controversial.
[49] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 277.

to deities as witnessed in meditative visions of realized Buddhist masters.[50,51] While such explanations may not be supported in academic circles, it is important to note that they are the most common given among the high Buddhist teachers with whom I spoke.

Variations in Instrumentation and Orchestration

Just as different schools, monasteries, and lineages follow different teachers and employ different methods, so too does their use of musical instruments in ritual differ. Rather than describing each school and lineage in detail, this author will suggest that the Buddhist school, type, size, and individual traditions of each monastery are all important variables that factor in to how instruments are employed and performed during ritual.

School of Buddhism

One of the first differences distinguished is between the various schools within Tibetan Buddhism. Certain schools, such as the Kagyü, are particularly known for their use and support of the arts, including mandala drawing, painting, torma construction and, naturally music. The Gelugpa on the other hand, are more widely known for their focus on scholarly disciplines such as philosophical study and debate. This is not to say that music and the arts are not the focus of some institutions or persons with the Gelugpa tradition or that the Kagyü do not also support scholarly study but rather to point out general differences in broad strokes.

Other school differences occur in the use of particular instruments. For example, within the Karma Kagyü, the *rgya gling* and the *rkang gling* are never played at the same time. They may be played during the course of the same ritual but never simultaneously. Thus, the *rkang gling* is only played together with the *sil snyan* to make offerings to wrathful

[50] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[51] I witnessed on a wall panel in Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery a painting of a deity sitting atop a lotus with a large assembly of gods standing beneath him. The gods appeared to be presenting the deity with offerings, among which were stringed and blown musical instruments.

deities, while the *rgya gling* is only played together with the *rol mo* for offerings to peaceful deities.[52]

Type of Monastery

Within the schools, however, a more precise differentiation can be made regarding the type of monastery. Some monasteries focus mostly on the *sutra* tradition, keeping mainly to Buddhist philosophy. Famous examples of such monasteries within the Gelugpa tradition are the three large monastic universities Ganden Namgyeling (*dga' ldan rmam rgyal gling*), Drepung (*'bras spungs dgon*), and Sera (*se ra*). Other monasteries, such as Gyumay (*rgyud-smad grva-tshang*) and Gyuto (*rgyud-stod grva-tshang*), focus more on the higher Tantric teachings and therefore include more ritual performance than philosophical institutions. These different designations do not necessitate that a monastery focusing on philosophy will not perform rituals or a Tantric institution will not incorporate some philosophy but are instead overally tendencies.

Kirti Monastery in McLeod Ganj, for example, is primarily an institution of philosophical study. While rituals are performed there, their frequency of performance is less, as is the number of instruments commonly used than other more ritually geared monasteries. Training in fields such as music and art is considerably less, as the curriculum at Kirti focuses mainly on philosophy, textual study and debate.[53]

Size of a Monastery

The size of an individual monastery also significantly impacts the musical performance tradition. A smaller monastery, for example, is less likely to have the resources to train young musicians as thoroughly and is less likely to have space in its curriculum for individual monks to engage in as in-depth studies of any one aspect of Tibetan Buddhist tradition as are possible at larger institutions. Tsechokling monastery, for example, due to its small size is limited in what training can be offered to its monks.

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[52] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 574.
[53] Anonymous, interview with the author, Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 18 April 2011.

According to one monk there, because of their small size they adopt a holistic approach training monks in a little of the disciplines as opposed to specializing in only one. Later on, if a particular monk is interested specifically in ritual or philosophy they have the choice to move to a larger institution where they can study their area of interest in greater detail.[54]

A second practical example of the impact of size on ritual occurs in the instrumental repertoire of a monastery's musicians, for example on the *rgya gling*. While at other monasteries a monk may know hundred of melodies, at Tsechokling there are only four melodies learned and performed during rituals. Each of these melodies has the equivalent of verses as well as a theme or refrain that is returned to after each verse.[55] To give the reader an idea of the size of this repertoire, the longest of the four melodies has only five verses, approximately fifteen seconds in length, and a refrain of about ten seconds. Depending on a learner's ability, these melodies can be learned within the course of a few days. As music is not the sole focus of the curriculum at Tsechokling, however, it is taught only two hours on Friday afternoons and therefore monks take some months to learn the repertoire of tunes.[56] Thus, in contrast to other monasteries where monks can become highly specialized due to the large number of inhabitants, the monks of Tsechokling must be 'jacks of all trades' to perform all of a monastery's necessary functions.

Figure 9 Tsechokling Monastery

Individual Traditions

Other differences in instrumentation and performance of ritual occur based on a monastery's individual traditions. Gyuto and Gyumay, for example, do not use the *rgya gling* in any ritual performances. The reason given for this peculiarity is that the *rgya gling* was never used at the monasteries in Tibet and, therefore, it is not used at these institutions

[54] Wangti, interview by author, Bir, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[55] Yeshe, interview by author, Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 15 April 2011
[56] Ibid.

in exile either.[57] These monasteries in particular are known for several distinctive practices such as the two unique styles of throat singing utilized by monks in pujas. Another is that monks at Gyuto bring not only a cup for tea but also a bowl and a small bag of tsampa (*rtsam pa*) with them to rituals. One monk told me this was to help tide the monks over in pujas that can last for up to fourteen hours a day, while another told me it was for offerings to the gods.[58,59] I would tend to believe both.

A second example is the playing of drums and cymbals at Namgyal monastery. At Namgyal the *sil snyan* are only ever played with *rnga chem* in the worship of wrathful deities while *rol mo* are only played with *chos rnga* in the worship of peaceful deities. The reason for this is the different types of music that befit wrathful and peaceful deities. *Rnga chem* can be played with two sticks and thus beaten faster, which is more befitting of wrathful deities. *Chos rnga* on the other hand can only be struck with one stick and therefore at a slower rate. This befits their music more to the worship of peaceful deities.[60]

In short, every school, lineage, and even monastery in addition to having their own unique repertoires and practices is quite likely to have their own orchestration and particular way of playing instruments during ritual performance.

Learning and Teaching Techniques

The various methods utilized to learn and teach the instruments of Buddhist ritual has already been touched upon in previous sections but there remains still some further explanation necessary. The primary and most basic methods for learning and teaching music used in Buddhist monasteries are through demonstration, observation and imitation. Here the axiom of 'watch and learn' is truly the norm. In private or class lessons the *dbu mdzad* or other teachers will often play through a section or demonstrate a particular movement once or twice and the student will imitate this performance. If the student is wrong, the teacher will correct him and the movement will be performed again and again

[57] Tupten, interview by author, Gyuto Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India, 20 April 2011.
[58] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.
[59] Tupten, interview by author, Gyuto Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India, 20 April 2011.
[60] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.

until it is done correctly.[61] Additionally, a great deal of learning comes through observation of senior musicians during rituals themselves.

As stated above, the *rgna* are widely held as the easiest instrument to play, requiring little to no training. According to one monk, all that is necessary before a monk plays during ritual is for him to observe a ritual once or twice and then keep an eye on the *dbu mdzad* while playing.[62] While not nearly as simple for the other instruments, a lot is learned from watching the senior monks perform. This author has witnessed on numerous occasions younger monks imitating the gestures of the *dbu mdzad* playing the *rol mo* or following the older monks in particular hand gestures or during sections where clapping is done.

Written Music

The *rol mo*, *dung chen*, and *rnga* are the only instruments in the Buddhist ritual ensemble that use a form of written notation. While this notation differs depending on the instrument and the Buddhist school, it can be described overall as various forms of straight and curved lines, as well as other circles and marks in the text of a ritual. These tell the performer what techniques must be done at different times. One important thing to note with written notation is that it is primarily used to show dynamics and rhythmic structure and *not* melody. This may seem odd to those of us trained in music in the West, but it is critical to understanding Tibetan ritual music. Melody and pitch are not considered nearly as important as the dynamics and rhythm of a section of music. This is quite evident with the level of importance placed and wide usage of non-melodic instruments, such as *rol mo* and *rnga* vis-à-vis melodic instruments, such as the *rkang gling* and *rgya gling*.

While scholars, such as Ellingson, have suggested that written music plays a very important role, my research has led to a different conclusion. Whereas Ellingson states, for example that "the use of notations in performance ... has contributed to the development of more musical variety and complexity in the monastic repertoire,"[63] This author has found

[61] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 340.
[62] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.
[63] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 290.

this not necessarily true. While written music surely exists and is used, it is an overstatement on the part of scholars trained in traditions with strong musical notation traditions to assume that for music to have developed in some complexity, written music was a decisive and necessary factor.

Firstly, it is factually incorrect that complex musical traditions require written notation. The ancient tradition of piobaireachd, for example developed on the Great Highland bagpipe without the aid of written music. Piobaireachd melodies lasting over twenty-five minutes in length, with subtle rhythmic alterations, time changes and pitch changes were all transmitted orally from student to teacher by voice with the aid of *canntaireachd*, a unique vocal language of song that corresponds to played notation. Certain musicians became masters of hundreds of such tunes, learning all by ear without the use of written notation. Similarly, the memorization of hundreds of pages of text that is required of monks in their monastic education would make it hardly improbable for monks to have the ability to memorize lengthy sections of instrumental music.

Second, this author never witnessed written music being used in any of the numerous rituals attended; all music was played from the memory of the monks. Even in private lessons on instruments with written music, such as the *dung chen*, no written music was present or referred to by those learning or teaching. While several monks referred to the existence of written music, it was said repeatedly that the primary method of learning any instrument was via oral transmission from teacher to student. One monk even said that written music is only referred to by older monks who while desiring to learn instruments, no longer possess the ability to absorb quickly through hearing and demonstration alone and therefore must learn though repeatedly examining texts.[64]

Like most other aspects of ritual practice, it is much safer and more accurate on behalf of scholars to say that the use of written music as a teaching technique or

[64] Tenpa Tathar, interview by author, Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 12 April 2011.

performance aid is likely to depend on the practices at each individual monastery and the ability of the student.

Learning Rgya Gling: A Case Study

It was this author's good fortune to have had the opportunity to take part in several lessons on the *rgya gling* and the *dung chen* at Tsechokling Monastery in McLeod Ganj. Yeshe, one of the monks training to become a *dbu mdzad* at the monastery, taught these lessons to for *rgya gling* to a group of twelve young monks and myself. The structure of such lessons was rather simple: Yeshe would play a section on his wooden flute and we would play after him as a group in imitation. Such method of instruction is quite simple, involving no exercises to practice finger movements or grace note trills, but quite difficult as well. After playing a fifteen second sequence only once or twice, the students were expected to be able to play it back error-free. After one round of repetition, Yeshe was quick to move on to the next section of music. It was quickly apparent that spacing out for the span of less than a minute meant a dreadful failure for the rest of the lesson, as most melodies built of a theme that once presented grew only more complication in subsequent parts.

Still, it was by no means learning from a stick-wielding taskmaster. Yeshe responded graciously to requests for a section to be repeated, although raising a hand during a music lesson appeared to be somewhat unorthodox. While this may have been my privilege as a foreigner sitting in on lessons, it suggested that the extent to which a monk learns may well depend on his own initiative and willingness to request further instruction.

Who are the Musicians?

The monks who play various musical instruments during rituals are chosen largely based on particular qualities at individual monasteries. One commonality found throughout all monasteries, however, is that only those who wish to play instruments do so. In general, a small class of young monks will start out learning one or more instruments and as time

progresses those who show talent and desire to continue playing will and those who do not will stop. Of that class, once players have reached a certain level in their training, the top several players will be selected by the *dbu mdzad* and senior monks of a monastery to perform in rituals.

Small monasteries, like Tsechokling for example, tend to teach all of the instruments to all of the monks. Larger monasteries, however, such as Namgyal often assign monks to learn different instruments. At Namgyal, for example, monk classes of twenty are divided in two based upon height. The taller group of students learn to play the *dung chen* and *dung khar*, likely as the *dung chen* requires a particularly high level of physical strength and stamina, and the shorter half learn the *rgya gling* and *kang gling*.[65] In this way, larger monasteries can divide their students and give them more specific and thorough courses of study of musical instruments while smaller monasteries must make the best of their more limited resources in covering all of the bases.

In ritual performance it is common that monks, especially on more physically exhausting instruments such as *rgya gling* and *dung chen* take turns playing in a rotation. It is thought that if a player gets too physically exhausted not only will their playing get worse, but they will not have the proper motivation and concentration during ritual. Additionally, if players no longer desire to perform as musicians in the ritual ensemble, this is widely accepted by the community. As music is played primarily as a sound offering, to be done properly a musician needs the proper mindset. This is not likely to be manifested within a physically or mentally exhausted monk. As Pungri Tulku stated, “Dharma is not something that can be forced from the outside. Rather, it is something that must manifest and blossom within the individual practitioner.”[66]

[65] Tupten, interview by author, Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 19 April 2011.
[66] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.

Musical Creativity and Composition in Ritual

Within the hierarchical, traditional and often highly structured world of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and lineages, it is often difficult to pick out the new from the old. When this author inquired as to the origins of various musical melodies or ritual texts the common response was either none at all or that such things are traditional and passed down by the gods. Indeed, Khenpo Langrik Singhe, Abbot of Bir Dirru Monastery in Bir, Himachal Pradesh told me that the melodies and texts for pujas were laid down eons ago, in time immemorial. The directions for what offerings, visualizations and other practices that must be performed during certain rituals was also included in the texts[67] at the time of their writing and thus cannot be traced.[68] Still, such explanations and references to the past do not mean that creativity and the writing of new texts does not manifest itself today in various ways. Indeed it does in the discovering of hidden treasures (*gter ma)*, changes in ritual by individual monks as well as the composition and incorporation of new prayers by high incarnate teachers, such as H.H. the 17th Karmapa.

Terma (*gter ma*)

Well known to the Nyingma (*rnying ma pa*) school, the tradition of 'hidden treasures,' (*gter ma*) buried by great teachers of the past, is also accepted by some of the other Buddhist schools, for example within the Karma Kagyü.[69] *Gter ma* are believed to have been hidden in places, such as the sky, earth, and in individual's minds, by ancient teachers (especially Guru Padmasambhava) to manifest in the minds or be uncovered when the time

[67] Puja texts consist of both large font, which is chanted aloud as well as smaller font, which provides directions for the particular ritual. The smaller text is not said aloud but contains information to be read regarding the proper visualizations, offerings, music and actions that should be taken during a particular part of a ritual. This information is written along with the spoken puja text and is believed to come from the master who wrote the text. His inspiration was the ritual of the gods he witnessed in states of deep meditation. Thus, again we are reminded that human ritual is done in imitation of rituals performed by the gods. Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[68] Khenpo Lungrik Singhe, interview by author, Bir Dirru Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.
[69] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.

is ripe for their teachings. The persons who uncover these treasures are called *gter ston*. *Gter ston* can be found in any time and indeed Pungri Tulku told me that there are several, such as Patrul Rinpoche, who are alive today.[70]

One example of a famous *gter ston* in recent history is Chokgyur Lingpa (1829-1870), who uncovered thirty-nine volumes of text believed hidden by Guru Padmasambhava. Chokgyur Lingpa uncovered and translated these texts into Tibetan from the secret script they were written in and in addition to the large letters, also wrote down the small letters instructing what manner the texts are to be recited and performed. In periods of meditative insight, indescribable to the majority of people, he uncovered the texts and the proper way they should be performed. His incarnations, the fourth of whom, Neten Chokling Rinpoche lives in Bir, Himachal Pradesh, are the guardians of these texts and currently reside at Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery in Bir, overseeing the monastery and the way Chokgyur Lingpa's *gter ma* are performed there.[71]

Thus, new texts written in ancient times can still be discovered today. Such teachings, hidden away until the time is ripe for their revelation, are one way in which the Buddhist cannon, although officially closed, continues to change and evolve.

Alterations by Monks and Masters

Alternatively, the way in which specific rituals are performed can change on the monastic level based on alterations from the *mkhan po* or *dbu mdzad*. *Mkhan po*, as the Mind manifestation at a monastery, can change the way in which rituals are performed, making alterations in the small prescriptive text of a ritual, or he can choose to include new rituals in the schedule.[72] For example, although the head of a lineage issues the schedule of rituals, individual abbots or Rinpoches can add additional pujas to the calendar of their monastery. These changes can be quite far reaching, depending on the size of a monastery and which rituals are added. For example, the head of Palung Sherab Ling Monastery, H.E.

[70] Ibid.
[71] Lama Rinchen, interview by author, Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.
[72] Ibid.

the 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche stated in 2006 that his monastery should begin to perform a new puja to Guru Padmasambhava once a year.[73] Thus, since 2006 a new yearly puja to Guru Rinpoche has become a part of the traditions of Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery.

Further, the *dbu mdzad* of a particular monastery can also make changes in ritual practice by personally choosing some of the prayers performed during rituals. While the main prayers of a puja are set down in a text, minor prayers such as the dedication or refuge often are not. In such instances, the *dbu mdzad* is free to choose from a wide variety of common prayers. For example, at Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery Tai Situpa is in charge of the schedule of pujas and chooses the main texts of these pujas. However, the decision for the various accompanying prayers, such as long life, dedications, invocations, and refuge, are left up to the *dbu mdzad.* He simply begins with a vocal and or instrumental introduction and the other monks follow and join in.[74,75]

Individual monks are also not left out of the pecking order. While individual melodic improvisation or instrumental solos are not allowed during ritual, monks are encouraged to chant as loud as possible as offerings more pleasing to the gods and lessening an individual monk's shyness.[76] This author even witnessed monks at other monasteries using a form of throat singing such as used in Gyuto and Gyumay, that they developed on their own. Additionally, in some monasteries today a group of monks may approach the leaders of a monastery and petition to have certain rituals held by popular demand, so to speak.[77] Indeed such democratization within monasteries is an interesting subject in its own right.

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[73] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[74] Ibid.
[75] When I asked Pungri Tulku whether instances occur when the *dbu mdzad* chooses prayers unknown to the other monks, I was told this is never the case. It is possible, he conceded, but "a monk with such an ego and desire to show off his knowledge of texts would never be chosen to become an *dbu mdzad."*
Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[76] Khenpo Lungrik Singhe, interview by author, Bir Dirru Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.
[77] Tenpa Tathar, interview by author, Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India, 12 April 2011.

Overall, it is clear that at the level of individual monasteries there is a great deal of liberty as to which prayers or rituals should be performed, when they should take place, and how they should be presented. Changes and alterations can come from various levels, the most widespread of which come from the heads of lineages, followed by abbots, *dbu mdzad*, and individual monks. More on the creativity of individual monks will be said in the next section.

Composition

Doing the beginning portion of research under the impression from various interviews that the writing of new texts and prayers was something rare if not close to non-existent, it was surprising to learn how normal it is for high teachers to write and promulgate new texts. The composition of new prayers is, in fact, quite common among many Buddhist teachers. Prayers are composed for a wide variety of reasons, such as praising ones teachers, praising a lineage, teaching students, memorializing an individual, remembering a place, giving an offering or simply expressing a special feeling experienced at a moment in time. Nevertheless, just as music is an offering up to the gods, whatever a high teacher writes and makes public is offered as a gift both to the gods and to their students.[78] Whether a master composes a poem, music, paints or makes a film, such endeavors are done with the primary intention to benefit their students, which is also open to mean all sentient beings.

Much such compositions are inspired by meditation on an individual's experiences and in the case of high teachers, meditations on their past lives.[79] Still, creativity is something that is largely manifest due to recent experiences. As Tai Situpa says "creativity is a gift that comes from many past lives, from childhood, from instinct, and from study."[80] Creativity therefore is something that can be present in any sentient being. In the Buddhist context, however, Tai Situ further explains the greatest art comes from people who not only

[78] His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche Shedrub Nyima, interview by author, Khampagar Monastery, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India, 25 April 2011.
[79] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[80] His Eminence the 12th Tai Situpa Rinpoche, *Relative World, Ultimate Mind*, ed. by Lea Terhune (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999), 15

posses a great amount of skill but who are also highly realized.[81] Thus, it is the greatest and most realized Buddhist teachers who are widely held as the greatest artists. This is one reason why the majority of texts, both traditional and contemporary, come from the most highly respected masters of a monastery, lineage, or school.

One famous example of a composition with a known origin is Rin chen Bzang po (958-1055) of the Sakya (*sa skya pa*) school. Before returning to Tibet from India to teach, having gathered a number of texts and studied with great Indian Buddhist masters, Rin chen Bzang po did a meditation on a protective deity to watch over and protect him on his journey and with the task of spreading the Dharma in Tibet. While deep in meditation he had a vision of a graveyard with a freshly laid corpse in the middle. Two tigers slowly stalked the corpse from either side and upon reaching it engaged in a struggle over the body, full of snarls growls and the sounds of tearing human flesh. Following this vision, it is said, Rin chen zang po awakened with inspiration for the proper way to praise his protective deity Mahakala (*mgon po nag po*), which is to sound when chanting like two growling tigers struggling to gain hold of the corpse. This story is still told and widely known today, and indeed the Sakya Mahakala ritual is still performed with this image in mind.[82]

A second and more contemporary example is the ritual practices of Palpung Sherab Ling. H.E. Tai Situ not only decides what rituals will be performed at his monastery and those associated with it, he is also an active composer himself and many of his competitions are used in ritual practice. As Pungri Tulku explains, “of course it is normal for the head of a lineage to choose what prayers and rituals be said in his monasteries, be they of ancient or modern origin.” New texts both from inside the Karma Kagyü lineage, such as composed by H.H. the 17th Karmapa (see below), as well as those composed by masters of other schools, such as the head of the Sakya school Sakya Trinzin, are also used. Nevertheless, “it is

[81] Ibid., 15.
[82] Khenpo Lungrik Singhe, interview by author, Bir Dirru Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 23 April 2011.

considered to bring special merit to use prayers that are composed by the leaders of the lineages, such as Tai Situpa, at their monastic seats."[83]

Figure 10 Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery

The reason that the public knowledge of new compositions of ritual text or music is largely limited to high masters, such as Rinpoches (*rin po che*) and Tulkus, is two-fold. First, as Ellingson describes it, "ritual music is an offering to, or a means of directly realizing the presence of deities; and so must be constructed to suit their specific natures and tastes, qualities which can only be perceived by a highly skilled meditator. Thus, many musical compositions are directly revealed to those who visit the extraphenomenal realms of the deities and (experience) their music performed in meditations or dreams."[84] In other words, as is stated by Tai Situpa above, a certain high level of realization is considered essential for any Buddhist to compose texts or melodies truly befitting the deities they seek to praise. Thus, the composition of such works is largely left up to those who are realized enough to visit the realms of deities and therefore also able to describe them accurately.

The second reason that only the compositions of high teachers are public is that it is not normal in Buddhist culture for monks to reveal their private spiritual life. In the words of Pungri Tulku, "it would be considered very strange or 'awkward' for a normal monk to reveal their private experiences."[85] Such things are better kept for private use and reflection and therefore are not published or widely available to the public.

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[83] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.
[84] Terry Ellingson, "The Mandala of Sound," 335.
[85] Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche, interview by the author, Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India, 24 April 2011.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that creativity or new compositions are limited to only a few Rinpoches or Tulkus but rather, is largely prevalent and even encouraged in even the most normal of monks. As Geshe Dorji Damdul stated "Any monk can be creative. It is not confined to the high lamas. In fact, it is an ordinary monk who is so creative in the practice of Buddhism that he reached an advanced level of religious practice that the next birth that he takes is then treated as a high lama."[86] Therefore, while showing off or making public of an individual's creative outlets, such as poetry, painting or musical composition may be a cultural 'no go,' the act of artistic creation itself from whatever source of inspiration and in whatever medium is encouraged. Just as visualizations and mental offerings proffered during a ritual make up an important yet non-verbalized component of Buddhist practice, so too do the silent and secret but present creative endeavors of both monks and masters.

Thus, just as purely visual observations of ritual music can lead to a false conclusion, missing all of the mental exercises and meditations occurring, so too can the lack of published work from regular monks lead to the false conclusion that composition is something reserved for realized masters, higher up.

The Creativity and Art of H.H. the 17th Karmapa

One high Buddhist teacher particularly well known for his wide-ranging artistic talent, despite his young age is the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. As the present incarnation of the oldest incarnate lama tradition and one that is particularly known for its creative and artistic masters (see for example the sculptures of the 10th Karmapa or the songs of the 16th), the 17th Karmapa is well versed and quite accomplished in a variety of artistic fields. I had an opportunity, for example, to see four works of his exquisite calligraphy on display and for sale as a fundraiser at his North American seat in Woodstock, New York. But his ability in visual art does not stop with painting; in fact he was produced great digital art, such as thangka (*thang ka*) mural depicting the previous sixteen Karmapas.

[86] Geshe Dorji Damdul, email message to Author, 28 April 2011.

Most of all, however, H.H. the Karmapa is widely known for his skill in poetic and musical compositions. During ritual, I was told he is a remarkable beautiful *rol mo* player. Outside of ritual he is an avid and interested musician. In one video available on Youtube, the Karmapa witnesses a young boy playing the violin for him. After intently watching the boy perform, the Karmapa is given the opportunity to play and successfully gets off several notes on an instrument many persons can only make chalkboard screeches on.[87] A second, and more telling example of the Karmapa's talent comes from Sonam Phuntsok, who works closely with the Karmapa on his artistic endeavors. Following one public audience, His Holiness called Phuntsok to remain after and come up to see him. When he arrived in Karmapa's chambers, His Holiness took out a Chinese zither and played a beautiful rendition of a melody Phuntsok had previously performed for the Karmapa. His Holiness had heard this melody only once and remembered it well enough to recall and transcribe for the zither.[88]

Poetry and Music

Of music, poetry, and painting the Karmapa himself said that

> "There is a close connection between poetry and painting. In painting, you use beautifully drawn forms, such as mountains lakes, and trees, to create something pleasing to the eyes. In poetry, related to speech, you use words to make something interesting and beautiful: music and song are pleasing to the ears and closely connected to poetry. When I came to like poetry, I came to like these other arts as well."[89]

And Karmapa's skill in poetry is also well known and respected. Of himself, he said that he first began to write poetry three or four years after arriving at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet under the tutelage of Lama Nyima. Since that time, he has written a large number of poems and been acclaimed for his ability by other masters and his teachers. Tai Situpa, a

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[87] H.H. the 17th Karmapa, "Karmapa, Sonam and a Violin," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvU7ENcWwvE.
[88] Sonam Phunstok, interview by author, Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts, McLeod Ganj, India, 12 April 2011.
[89] H.H. the 17th Karmapa in conversation with the author, Gyutö Ramoche University, Sidhbari, Dharamsala, India, June 2000, in Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky: The Life, Art and Teachings of the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2003) 224.

senior teacher of the Karmapa for example said “Karmapa is very remarkable. What he knows, his standard is unbelievable. His poetry, his ritual, his philosophy and knowledge of the texts; unbelievable. If I say ten times better than me I am not exaggerating.” He further stated that, “I saw him composing this text of ritual involved with deities and prayers ad protectors and all of that – he has composed almost 200 pages already just in the last month. Karmapa was just saying and the monk was typing into his computer. He goes on like that for ten pages, spontaneous and perfect. It’s unbelievable.” [90]

Of his own ability, the Karmapa is more modest. He said, for example that “when I write a poem, I need to reflect on it, yet as I’m thinking I do not remember how to compose the words. Then suddenly, the poem comes right through and it reads well. Most of my writing happens this way.”[91] Thus, like many other masters, the Karmapa goes into states of meditation, concentrating on what he desires to write about. While it may not happen right away, inspiration will hit like a bolt of lightening. The Karmapa has written and made public many of his poems, which include long life prayers for his teachers such as H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, H.E. the 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche, and Thrangu Rinpoche. He has also written for great men who have passed away, such as H.H. the Dalai Lama’s personal physician Tendzin Chödrak, for students of the Karma Kagyü lineage, for peace, and for special moments during his life.

Perhaps His Holiness’ most famous poem is “A Joyful Aspiration,” which he composed en route during his harrowing escape from Tibet in 2000. This journey was no less uncertain and dangerous than any other escape from Tibet and was made particularly dangerous as H.H. got quite sick. Still, he had the positive attitude and motivation enough to write this poem, which was published shortly after his arrival in Dharamsala. Of “A Joyful Aspiration,” H.H. the Dalai Lama said

> “I was so very surprised and happy when I read the profound poem by the 17th Karmapa as he wrote about his escape from Tibet in poetic form. Even my poems do not have this quality or profundity. I realized that the Karmapa is in

[90] H.E. Tai Situpa Rinoche in Mick Brown, *The Dance of 17 Lives: The Incredible True Story of Tibet’s 17th Karmapa* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 275.
[91] H.H. the 17th Karmapa in Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky,* 224.

> fact a being who possess the clarity of inner-wisdom, who is very keen to learn Buddhist logic and philosophy. I told many others about the poem and how wonderful it was from the point of view of his knowledge of Dharma and the wisdom within."[92]

This poem was later put to music written by the Karmapa himself and recorded by students from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in 2000 on a CD entitled *Karmapa's Melodious Songs of Truth*. In 2002 it was released to a larger audience on a CD entitled *Sweet Melody of Joyful Aspiration*. This release, for example, spread the CD and the Karmapa's poetry and song around the globe. The author, for example, bought a copy of this CD at a book store in Berlin, Germany.

The Playwright

A lesser known, but equally refined talent of the Karmapa is his skill as a playwright, director, actor and designer. In 2009 as the culmination of four years of teachings on the life of the great Tibetan saint (and musician I would add) Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*) approached at the Kagyü Monlam in Bodhgaya, H.H. began to prepare for a theatrical depiction of Milarepa's life story. This production was presented on the evening of January 1st 2010 at the conclusion of the Kagyü Monlam. For more than eight months before, His Holiness researched and wrote the entire script for the play based on various records and texts describing Milarepa's life. The writing alone does not begin to describe the extent of Karmapa's work on the production, however.

His Holiness completely designed the set and a truly unique stage in the form of a semi-circle with three stages of various levels framed by a massive white lotus under which stood a tree.[93] Karmapa also designed the costumes and the lighting, directed the placement and selection of the sixty monks and nuns who performed prayers during the

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[92] H.H. the Dalai Lama, Public Talk, Namgyal Monastery, Dharamsala, India, 21 August 2001, in Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky,* 225.
[93] This is likely a reference to the place the performance was held; Bodhgaya where Siddhartha Gautama is said to have achieved Enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree.

play and chose the prayers to be said well.[94] Additionally, he attended and directed every rehearsal along with his Assistant Director, Sonam Phuntsok, a long-time teacher of Tibetan Opera (*lha mo*) at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts (TIPA) and actor of Marpa, Milarepa's primary teacher, in the production.

Despite pressure from Taiwanese donors to have professional Taiwanese actors dominate the cast of the play, His Holiness chose to employ actors from TIPA in the performance. Phuntsok further explained the reason for this decision in the connection between the Karmapa, TIPA, and Milarepa. The Karmapa's first address to the public after his arrival to Dharamsala, Phuntsok recalls, occurred at TIPA. No one, Phuntsok notes knew anything about the Karmapa coming, it all happened very quickly. That day, when Karmapa arrived, Phuntsok's students at TIPA were in the middle of performing the opera of the life of Milarepa. Thus, when it came time for the performance of the Karmapa's version, such a strong karmic connection to TIPA was at the top of the Karmapa's thoughts.[95]

During rehearsal, Phuntsok described how Karmapa would tell the actors to stop at certain points and then proceed to perfectly demonstrate each and every role; "quite a brilliant actor." What is more, whenever doubts or confusions arose about the correct representations of certain events, Karmapa would stop and close his eyes for a minute before snapping them open and saying straight away which page in what book should be turned too for the answer or the right descriptions of events.[96] Phuntsok noted that the Karmapa is believed to be an incarnation of Milarepa and so he believes that when His Holiness shut his eyes he was reflecting through meditation on his former life as the great Tibetan yogi.[97]

The performance itself was like nothing I have ever witnessed. Held at night with modern lights and equipment from Taiwan and performed on a half-circle stage it highly

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[94] *The Life of Milarepa*, DVD, directed by H.H. the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Kagyü Monlam Office, 2010.
[95] Sonam Phunstok, interview by author, Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts, McLeod Ganj, India, 12 April 2011.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.

contrasted traditional Tibetan productions done all day in theaters in the round. Furthermore, the intense emotions of violence and anger expressed, for example by Milarepa's uncle, aunt, and teacher Marpa, are truly remarkable for a Tibetan theater performance. Still, Karmapa did an excellent job in directing the story; after all Milarepa's life story is one of violence and revenge and finally utter despair and repentance for his actions, leading him to take up the practice of the Dharma that lead him to Enlightenment.

Regarding his ongoing work with the Karmapa, Phuntsok remarked that His Holiness is truly "a remarkable and highly talented master. His musical, technological, poetic, and artistic abilities are truly unbelievable." Lastly, Phuntsok told with a twinkle in his eye, is that the Karmapa is still quite young.[98] He has many years of great things still to come. When I inquired what was next on the Karmapa's agenda, Phuntsok answered that His Holiness had expressed some interest in putting the life story of the Buddha on stage and that he is in the process of gather sources to present the Karmapa with for the writing of this work.[99] In the end, we will have to wait and see what His Holiness genius next produces.

For his musical, poetic and artistic talents, the Karmapa has received a great deal of attention from Buddhists and the world. After conferring the Milarepa empowerment on December 29th, 2009 to those attending the Kagyü Monlam and presenting each with a fragment of Milarepa's cotton robe as well as an image he had created of Milarepa himself, the performance took place on January first. One of the most important aspects of the performance that is both telling of the play as well as the motivation behind Karmapa's creative work in general, is the introduction. His Holiness states,

> "I pray that every moment of his (Milarepa's) inspiring life story becomes a source of confidence and sustained strength for each of us, and that this performance ensures that Milarepa's flawless character and perfect qualities are not forgotten. Although many have already read Milarepa's biography, I pray that the live enactment of this history plants seeds of liberation within the minds of each and everyone who sees it."[100]

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] *The Life of Milarepa*, DVD.

The play is indeed a sacred offering given with the expressed wish to help all who encounter on their path to liberation. A true Bodhisattva, His Holiness the Karmapa dedicates this play, as he does with all of his creative works for the benefit of all Sentient Beings with the great motivation to help them break free from a cyclical existence of suffering and attain Enlightenment. This is the motivation behind any true master's creative endeavors; to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Conclusion

> "Hearing a beautiful melody can invoke your wisdom body and thereby have a peaceful and harmonious effect on your mind, in the same way as meditation of calm abiding brings inner peace. If you can sustain this calmness, you will develop inwardly, moving through insight all the way up to the ultimate level of realization."[101]

The field of Buddhist ritual is too vast to cover in all of its particularities in this paper and surely this author has made numerous errors in his analysis. For such, he begs the readers for understanding and expresses his apologies. The intention in writing was not to try and master the world of Buddhist ritual or completely describe the instrumentation used but rather to gain a better appreciation of how complex and changing this field of study is. In Buddhism, where truth is accepted on many levels and often within contradictory statements, it is easy to become confused or try to emphasize one idea over others. In music, therefore, it is important to remember this, that if two monks say different or even opposing statements, neither of them is necessarily false.

What is most important of all to remember is that Buddhism is an inner journey of taming ones mind and generating compassion towards all other sentient beings. Thus, while it can be attempted on a scholarly level to analyze and describe various practices and concepts, a true understanding can only come through individual practice and experience. Thus, there are many things that cannot be described on paper or even translated from the world of meditative experience into human language. There really is much more than meets the ear or the eye.

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[101] H.H. the 17th Karmapa in Michele Martin, *Music in the Sky,* 224.

While music has no inherent value in Buddhist practice, it is not to be underestimated as a powerful tool on the path to awakening. In a ritual performance, which changes from school to school, lineage to lineage, and monastery to monastery, music is used primarily as an offering to the gods; a *snyan pa* or aural offering of music that is both pleasing and befitting a deity. However, more than an offering to the gods, ritual music is an offering from a monk to himself and to all who hear him. By giving up the best possible sounds, rhythms and melodies a monk is capable of producing as an offering to the gods and to the world, he is lessening his own attachment and of those who hear him to such sensual pleasures on his path to a higher state of being. Whether vocal or performed on the various ritual musical instruments, monks offer music not for their personal pleasure or self-gratification but as a means of overcoming such egocentric desires.

The necessary ingredient in any offering or endeavor is the motivation behind it. A musician can play, a poet can speak and an actor can act, but without the proper motivation their actions will be meaningless. In a Buddhist context, proper motivation is categorized by contemplation on Compassion and Emptiness as well as dedicating all of ones actions for the benefit of the Three Jewels. With a concentrated mind and the proper motivation, anything can be considered an offering. The tsampa made for breakfast, the jazz played on a saxophone or even the entire universe. Whether a great master, like His Holiness the Karmapa composing plays, poems, and musical masterpieces, or a simple person drawing with a stick in the sand, there is little difference. As Lama Rinchen stated, the light of the Buddha is like the sun, shining indiscriminately on the entire world. Anything is an offering, a tool on the path to Enlightenment, when it is meant to be so.

Appendix and Glossary of Terms

List of the CDs of the Karmapa:

Melodious Songs of Truth, Tshurgar Labrang Dharma Cakra Center, Rumtek, Sikkim (2000)

Sweet Melody of Joyful Aspiration, Wind Records, Taiwan (2002)

Karma Pakshi Chant – Live From Bodhgaya, Khaeon World Music (2002)

The Lion Roar, Wind Music, Taiwan (2006)

Lion's Roar – Great Compassion, Primal Beat Creations (2007)

Refuge, Primal Beat Creations (2010)

Glossary of Terms in Order of their Appearance

sa skya pa – the Sakya school, one of the five major schools in Tibetan Buddhism. One of the three 'new orders,' it particularly follows the teachings of the Indian Mahasiddha Virupa and was founded in Tibet by Gönchok Gyelpo.

mchod pa – an offering given by monks to the gods. Traditionally there are seven offerings of water (x2), flour, incense, butter lamps, water, food, and sound made to the five senses.

snyan pa – Aurally beautiful. This term refers to music offered to the gods, which should be both pleasing to the ear and played with the proper motivation and concentrations on Compassion and Emptiness.

gtor ma – An offering used in ritual made out of sculpted butter. *Gtor ma* can be quite simple or elaborate and are given as food offerings to deities during a ritual.

mchod – the Tibetan word for puja or ritual.

dkon mchog kun 'dus gsum – The Three Jewels to and in whom all Buddhists take refuge. These refer to the Buddha, both the historical and various others who have achieved perfect awakening and broken free from Samsaric existence; the Dharma, or the teachings of the Buddhas; and the Sangha, or the Buddhist community.

Ram Yam Kam – Sanskrit symbols denoting Fire, Wind, and Water, which are used at the beginnings of some rituals for the contemplation of Emptiness.

dge lugs pa – the Gelugpa school, one of the five major schools in Tibetan Buddhism. They are considered the more scholarly and scholastic school, having been formed partially in reaction to the ornate ritual practices of the older three schools (Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyü). It was founded in Tibet by Tsongkhapa.

bka'-brgyud – the Kagyü school, one of the five major schools in Tibetan Buddhism. They are commonly known as the school of oral transmission, referring to the especially strong emphasis on guru-student transmission in teaching the Dharma. It was founded by Milarepa's student, Gampopa.

kar ma bka' brgyud – The Karma Kagyü, a subset of the Kagyü school. This school is headed by H.H. the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. It was founded by the first Karmapa, Tüsum Khyenpa.

sprul sku – Tulku, an incarnate teacher. This person consciously chooses to reincarnate to continue teaching and working for the benefit of all sentient beings.

mgon po nag po – Sanskrit: Mahakala. A fierce protector deity found in various forms, for example with two, four, or six arms. He is especially central in practice of the Kagyü school and is the personal protective deity of H.H. the Karmapa.

rol mo – A term referring to several aspects of ritual, meaning: instrumental music; a particular variety of cymbals with a large hemispherical dome in the middle used primarily in the worship of peaceful deities; the player of cymbals, often the *dbu mdzad*, who leads the ritual performance.

dbu mdzad – The master and leader of ritual at any monastery. He is in charge of knowing and leading all pujas as well as for the musical education of monks and of those training to become *dbu mdzad*.

brdung ba – Beaten instruments; a term referring to the way these instruments are played either by percussion or concussion.

'khrol ba - Rung instruments; a term referring to the way certain instruments are played by oscillating the wrist, causing an attached striker to hit a section of an instrument and produce sound.

'bud pa – Blown instruments; a term referring to the method used to play certain ritual instruments, by blowing air through pursed lips through the body of an instrument, the sound being caused by vibrations of the lips or a reed.

rgyu rkyen – Stringed instruments; refers to instruments that use the vibrations of taughten strings to produce sound. No such instruments are used in Buddhist ritual.

mkhan po – The Abbot of a monastery; the head administrator, spiritual director, and educational supervisor of a monastery.

rgya gling – A Blown instrument played by passing air through a reed to produce sound in a cylindrical tube. It is often used during peaceful offerings and is the only instrument that is played using discrete pitches as opposed to slurred melodies.

dung chen – A Blown instrument played by passing air through pressed lips down a long slightly flaring tube. It is well known for its low blaring pitches played during rituals.

sbub 'chal – Another term for *rol mo*, specifically referring to the hemispherical cymbals.

sil snyan – A Beaten instrument; these gently sloping, conical shaped cymbals are mainly used in rituals for wrathful deities.

Rnga - A Beaten instrument. This is the generic term used for any drum employed in ritual.

chos rnga – A Beaten instrument. This refers specifically to drums attached to some sort of stick or staff that are played using sickle shaped sticks.

rnga chem – A Beaten instrument. As they are normally too large to be held in the air, these drums are mounted on square frames and played usually with one or two short, straight sticks.

mkhar rnga – A Beaten instrument. These are bronze gongs of various sizes often used in ritual or to call monks to assemble for a puja.

dung dkar – A Blown instrument. Conch shell trumpets, considered especially rare, and used in primarily in the worship of peaceful deities or to call monks to assemble for ritual.

da ma ru – A Beaten or Rung instrument. This 'hourglass drum' is mainly played the *mkhan po, dbu mdzad*, or another senior monk during ritual.

dril bu – A Rung instrument. This bell is always played in conjunction with the *rdo rje*. It is commonly believed to symbolize the female element and wisdom.

rdo rje - A Rung instrument. While producing no audible sound to humans, monks believe it produces tones audible to the gods. Played only in combination with the *dril bu*, the *rdo rje* symbolizes the male element and method.

sangs rgyas sprul sku – Shakyamuni Buddha; the historical Buddha who lived and taught across what are today, northern India and southern Nepal.

rkang gling – A Blown instrument. The 'thighbone trumpet' is often used in the worship or wrathful deities. Today it is often made of precious metals instead of human or animal bones.

gu ru pad ma 'byung gnas – Also called Guru Rinpoche, he is held by Tibetan Buddhists to be the second Buddha of this age and the patron saint of Tibet. He was invited from India to Tibet during the 8th century, and is credited as the first teacher to spread the Dharma in Tibet, conquering and converting numerous obstacles and opposing deities. He is also believed to have hidden numerous teachings (*gter ma*) to be uncovered later when the time is ripe for their promulgation.

rtsam pa – Roasted barley flour, it is a staple of traditional Tibetan diet as well as used frequently as an offering in rituals.

rnying ma pa – The Nyingma school, one of the five schools in Tibetan Buddhism. It is the oldest tradition, tracing its origins back to the teachings of Guru Rinpoche.

gter ma – Hidden treasures believed to have been hidden in the minds of individuals, as well as the sky and earth. It is believed they are uncovered by masters in deep meditative states when the time for their need arises.

rin po che – "Precious One," this honorific title is given to all reincarnate lamas and commonly to other highly realized teachers as well.

mi la ras pa – Considered to be one of the greatest Yogis of Tibet, Milarepa is well known for going from a life of violence to renunciation, eventually reaching Enlightenment during one lifetime. He is especially regarded in the Kagyü tradition.

lha mo – Tibetan Opera. Traditional performances were held all day over the course of several days at festivals in a stage style similar to theater in the round. Modern adaptations for Tibetan communities in exile and Western audiences, however, are often significantly abridged.

Interviews

*****Please note that for the purpose of protecting some identities, certain interviewees have been identified by their given name only or none at all.

Anonymous. Interview with the Author. Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 18 April 2011.

Geshe Dorji Damdul. Email message to Author. 28 April 2011.

Jampa. Interview by Author. Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 13 April 2011.

His Eminence the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche Shedrub Nyima. Interview by Author. Khampagar Monastery, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India. 25 April 2011.

Khenpo Lungrik Singhe. Interview by Author. Bir Dirru Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India. 23 April 2011.

Lama Rinchen. Interview by Author. Pema Ewam Chögar Gyurme Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India. 23 April 2011.

Phunstok, Sonam. Interview by Author. Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts, McLeod Ganj, India. 12 April 2011.

Tathar, Tenpa. Interview by Author. Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 12 April 2011.

Tenzin. Interview by Author. Kirti Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 18 April 2011.

Tupten. Interview by Author. Gyuto Tantric Monastery, Sidhbari, India. 20 April 2011.

Tupten. Interview by Author. Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 19 April 2011.

Umdze Tenzin Thendup. Interview by Author. Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 21 April 2011.

Venerable Pungri Tulku Rinpoche. Interview by the Author. Palpung Sherab Ling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India. 24 April 2011.

Wangyal, Karma. Interview by Author. Palyul Chökhorling Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India. 23 April 2011.

Wangti. Interview by Author. Bir, Himachal Pradesh, India. 24 April 2011.

Yeshe. Interview by Author. Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 15 April 2011.

Yeshe. Interview by Author. Tsechokling Monastery, McLeod Ganj, India. 19 April 2011.

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Research Methodology and Suggestions for Further Research:

It was both my great pleasure and privilege to embark on such an adventure into spiritual and mental realms of the unknown. Before arriving in Asia, I was very interested in how I could connect with people of a different culture, language, history, and religious practice than myself. As a musician, I hoped that I could connect with others and cross the divide through the universal realms of musical expression and experience. In some ways this project fulfilled this hope, while in others it smashed it to pieces.

I was unsure how to conduct my research at first and so adopted a variety of methods. Firstly, I made it a point of searching out and observing Buddhist ritual practices. I spent numerous days only sitting, listening and watching pujas from the back of the main temple room. After each section ended I made my way and often found monks who were very happy to speak with me regarding the particulars of what was done during each ritual. Most often, however, they could not tell me why particular actions were taken or individual aspects of ritual were done. This left me with enough data to write a descriptive book report, but not enough to write an argument.

I was further successful in getting permission from the Abbot of Tsechokling Monastery to attend music lessons with the young monks. This experience was invaluable in learning the methods of instruction and learning that are commonly used to teach music in a monastic setting. Nevertheless, based purely on experiential levels of participation, I found myself with massive amounts of descriptive data with little analysis and little clue where to begin. I had seen and experienced a great deal but was unsure what most of if meant.

The second stage of my research consisted of a variety of interviews with various high teachers, such as Pungri Tulku, Lama Rinchen, and H.E. Khamtrul Rinpoche as well as reading through various texts and academic works done on the subject. On their own, these interviews and information were enough to write a research paper. Combined with my own time witnessing rituals and taking part in musical training, however, they proved invaluable in a holistic understanding of the role of music in Tibetan Buddhist practice.

I would suggest to any student in the future not to remain aloof as purely a researcher but to get truly engaged in what they are studying by volunteering, taking lessons or doing whatever fits the individual situation. To gain knowledge from books alone is a wonderful thing. To combine book knowledge with individual experience, however, is truly the key to developing *wisdom*.

My research was quite scattered. In fact, I spent a significant amount of my time catching glimpses and spending hours or days instead of weeks at one place. While this has partly to do with the time constraints of a one-month research project, it was also the way my project worked out. I would suggest further that other projects in the field of Buddhist ritual and music be more specific in their location and subject matter. Works that examine the history of specific instruments or rituals, although difficult to be sure, would be great additions to a field that is largely still composing survey pieces.

Additionally it would be of great interest specifically to study new compositions, as was my intention at the beginning of ISP. To study the life of one particular Terton or Rinpoche who is active in composing music or text would be very informative and rewarding. For example, a study could focus on the thirty-nine volumes of text uncovered by Chokgyur Lingpa or look at Patrul Rinpoche's contemporary writing and recording of hip-hop music.

Ritual music is truly a virgin forest with very little work being done by only a handful of experts today. While this makes researching it quite difficult, it also makes is incredibly rewarding.

Figure 11 My dear friends at Tsechokling. From L-R Khenpo la, Myself, Geshe Lobsang Tenpa