Watch Chöd Self: An Examination of Chöd, Its Practitioners, and Its Music

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Watch Chöd Self
An Examination of Chöd, Its Practitioners, and Its Music

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Abstract

The practice of Chöd is a form of Vajrayāna meditation that involves cutting one’s attachment to one’s self and compassionately offering one’s body as a feast for various deities and spirits. This study examines the practice of Chöd in the context of Boudha, Kathmandu, where there is a large community of Chödpas, Chöd practitioners. This work aims to document the history of the practice, the experiences of some current Chöd practitioners, and the role that music plays in Chöd. This knowledge was acquired through observing Chödpas, speaking with them directly, and sitting in on various learning opportunities to gain firsthand knowledge of the intricacies of the practice. This study particularly focuses upon the use of instruments and music in the practice of Chöd. It examines how Chödpas think about the music used in their practice, how they learned to utilize the instruments involved, and the instruments themselves. It also briefly examines the history of the practice and some of the individual Chödpas who agreed to discuss their practice. Understanding the differences in practice and conception among various Chödpas allows a more nuanced view of Chöd to be formed, while an examination of the music focuses on a part of the practice that is often examined in less detail and adds to the body of information on ritual music in Tibetan Buddhism.
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Introduction

Vajrayāna or Tantric practices in Tibetan Buddhism are often misunderstood by those outside the community of Tantric practitioners. For many, the phrase might conjure up images of sex, death, and violence without much idea about how these things are actually utilized; however, far from being an outlet through which one can indulge in these passions, Vajrayāna practices are more accurately conceptualized as a highly effective set of practices through which one can achieve enlightenment in as little as one lifetime. Vajrayāna has been called the “Diamond Vehicle,” hinting at the idea of indestructibility—as it is held that once you reach a certain point in these practices you cannot regress, and the “Lightning Vehicle,” as it is comparatively faster than other methods of reaching enlightenment. Part of the ethos of Vajrayāna practice is the belief that the basic state of a human being is already like an enlightened Buddha state—a state from which most are simply distracted. Following from this belief, many forms of Vajrayāna meditation and other Vajrayāna practices involve visualizing yourself as if you are already enlightened. While thought of as highly effective, these practices are also believed to be dangerous methods that require special training and a special initiation in order for them to be used. Indulging in Tantric practice without the proper knowledge and understanding can result in extremely negative harm to the self.

One particular form of Vajrayāna meditation is known as Chöd (gcod). In its current form, this practice derives from the teachings of Machik Labdrön (ma gcig labs sgron), who unified various knowledge from sources such as Pa Dampa Sangyé into a technique known as the ‘Chöd of Mahāmudrā.’ Machik Labdrön was a Tibetan woman who is often viewed as an emanation of Tārā and the Great Mother Prajñāpāramitā as well as a dākinī, a female deity. She is notable for being the only Tibetan to teach a distinct tradition that spread back into India and for being a woman who founded an independent tradition. This tradition—Chöd—is associated with the idea of severance. Through Chöd, practitioners aim to sever one’s connection to the self and compassionately offer their bodies as a feast to various deities, spirits, and other beings.

The practice itself is closely associated with the idea of prajñāpāramitā. Prajñāpāramitā can be defined as the recognition that there is no intrinsic essence to either self or phenomenon. Chöd has in fact been described as the Vajrayāna enactment of prajñāpāramitā. It is rooted in the philosophy of prajñāpāramitā, but draws practical methods and inspiration from Tantric

1 Hubert Decleer in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
5 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 22; Edou, Machig Labdrön and the Foundation of Chöd, 6.
7 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 25.
9 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 31.
practices.\textsuperscript{10} This makes sense, given that Chöd is concerned with the recognition that one’s fixations upon perceptions of the self as an intrinsic and absolute reality need to be severed.\textsuperscript{11}

In actual practice, Chöd has often been performed in what could be described as “scary” places. Graveyards, charnel grounds, cremation grounds, and places such as these have been frequented by Chöd practitioners, often at night. These locales perhaps help to test the discipline of the mind by bringing fear and thus attachment to self to the forefront of the mind. Doing Chöd in these places also parallels the accepted story of Machik Labdrön’s previous life in the time shortly before that life was ended and was reborn as Machik Labdrön—in this previous life she, then a man, was said to have spent the night in a charnel ground and been harassed by apparitions sent by a dākinī, which he overcame, forcing the dākinī to protect the Dharma.\textsuperscript{12} At the same time, Chöd practitioners have been seen to practice at places such as the Boudha Stupa in broad daylight in full view of the many locals and tourists wandering around and circumambulating the stupa. While often thought of as a solitary practice, some Chöd practitioners, at least in Boudha, practice in groups. Following the ceremony to mark the completion of the repairs Boudha Stupa from damage done during the 2015 earthquake, there were large groups performing Chöd around the stupa.

The practice and performance of Chöd can be a purely mental endeavor, but often it is accompanied by ritual instrumentation and chanting or singing. Three instruments are generally used during the performance of Chöd meditation—a bell (\textit{dril bu}), an hourglass-shaped drum called a damaru (\textit{da ma ru}), and the thighbone trumpet referred to as the kangling (\textit{rkang gling}). The bell is held in the left hand and the drum in the right. Both are played while the Chödpa sings and chants, oftentimes reading from a Tibetan text. The thighbone trumpet is used more sparingly during the meditation practice. This music serves to accentuate the mental visualization that is at the heart of Chöd. In this meditative visualization, the practitioner envisions himself or herself taking their consciousness out of their body, cutting off the top of their skull, and feeding their body and blood to a gathering of dākinīs—a sort of enlightened female deity, spirits, and other deities.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Sheehy, “Severing the Source of Fear,” 39.
\textsuperscript{11} Sheehy, “Severing the Source of Fear,” 38.
\textsuperscript{12} Edou, \textit{Machig Labdrön and the Foundation of Chöd}, 121.
\textsuperscript{13} Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, “The Ax That Cuts Through Fixation on the Self,” 197-199.
Considering the practice of Chod in Boudha, several questions present themselves. Who exactly are the Chödpas of Boudha? What form of Chöd do they practice and how do they themselves conceptualize it? Amongst these practitioners, how were they taught to practice Chöd and how were they taught to use the instruments involved? The ritual music in Buddhist ritual practices has been an oft overlooked realm of study, leaving space for interesting questions involving Chöd and the music involved in the practice. How, for instance, does the use of instruments in Chöd compare to their use during other rituals? How does one pick which bell or drum to acquire for use in the practice? Is there one established way of learning to use the instruments or does it vary from practitioner to practitioner? Is there one correct way to play the instruments or does it vary depending on what the practitioner is doing? Through this study, the practice of Chöd as a whole will be examined and some of these questions may be addressed.

A further point of interest has to do with the words that people choose to use to describe their practice. At least in the largely English speaking culture of the United States, the idea of music, dance, or other performing arts is interestingly tied to the idea of performing a ritual practice such as Chöd. In English, we speak of “performing a ritual” perhaps more often than we speak of “completing” or “doing a ritual.” This betrays a certain way of thinking about ritual practices—we “perform” them; they are performances of a sort. The phrases that people choose to use to describe something are often indicative of the way that they think about that thing. Maybe people do not necessarily say what they mean, but they likely mean what they say, which is perhaps equally telling. How is it that Chöd practitioners think about and talk about their practice? Words matter.
Prior to Practicing Chöd...

Prior to beginning to practice Chöd, there is a tripartite sequence of events that potential practitioners are supposed to undertake. These three steps are called Wang (dbangs), Lung (lung), and Ti (khrid). Wang is the empowerment, which grants permission to wear certain clothing and play certain instruments used in Tantric rituals. There are different kinds of empowerments for different types of Chöd. One particular type is the “Supreme Empowerment” (dbangs chen) received by Kalsang Tso, a Chöd practitioner with whom I spoke, which granted her permission to use the kangling and wear the robes of a ngakma, a Tantric practitioner. Empowerments such as these are usually granted by Rinpoches or other experienced monks.\(^{14}\)

Lung is the second step, which follows the empowerment done during Wang, and is also involved with receiving permission to practice. Lung essentially involves a Lama, Lopon (blo dpon), or Rinpoche reading all of the texts involved in the practice to the prospective students. This does not take a very long time as it is a fast reading, and things are not explained. The explanation actually takes place as the third step called Ti. During this final part of the process, the older texts in particular are explained to the students. Completing this three-part process is necessary before one begins to perform Chöd; however, it is not always necessary to complete all three before beginning to learn parts of the process such as playing the instruments. For instance, Kalsang Tso received only a Lung of sorts when she first began to learn, but later received all three parts of this initiation process.\(^{15}\)

In addition to this tripartite process, there is a certain body of actions referred to as the ‘preliminary practice.’ This should ideally be completed before beginning to practice Chöd, but it is sometimes acceptable to complete it as you continue the process. As an idea, the preliminary practice is meant to help you purify yourself. Among other things, it consists of actions such as doing prostrations—typically in quantities of 100,000 over a period of time—while chanting, making a mandala and doing 100,000 offerings, and reciting many different mantras—once more in quantities of 100,000.\(^{16}\)

Furthermore, before actually undertaking the meditation involved in Chöd, one must be aware of the three parts to the meditation process—for lack of better terms, the introduction, the main section, and the conclusion. In the introduction, the person going to meditate must be sure that their motivation for doing the meditation is to be able to help people and bring them out of misery—in many ways it is an exercise in compassion. In the main section, one applies the concept of prajñāpāramitā in a more practical manner—by doing the meditation itself, and in the conclusion, the practitioner must be sure to dedicate their practice for the benefit of all sentient beings.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{14}\) Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November, 2016

\(^{15}\) Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November, 2016.

\(^{16}\) Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November, 2016.

\(^{17}\) Hubert Decler in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
A Brief Description of the Practice

At its most basic level, Chöd is a form of meditation wherein the practitioner goes through a series of visualizations while chanting from a text and playing various ritual instruments. The visualizations are truly the core of the practice, but the chanting and playing of music are both seen as fairly indispensable parts of the process. Chöd does occur in group settings, but it is often a solitary practice, with the practitioner going to a “scary” place such as a charnel ground or graveyard in order to practice. Once at this place, the practitioner often performs a series of rituals and dances in order to prepare it for the meditation by purifying it and calling various deities and spirits. When this has been accomplished, the practitioner sits down and goes through the visualizations, which are meant to help them accomplish the act of “cutting away the self” by offering their own body as a feast to the spirits, deities, and beings that have been called.18 There are four different feasts in Chöd—the red, white, black, and mixed feast.19 The following description follows deals mostly with the multicolored or mixed feast.20

Although the visualizations can differ to a degree, the basic form and process is shared between most types and traditions. The visualization process often begins with you visualizing yourself in your typical ordinary form. You are inside your body and aware as you would normally be. Once you are able to visualize and feel this, you envision your mind as a sphere of white light resting within the central channel in the center of your body. This white sphere encompasses all the deities and aspects of deities within your body, as well as your own life force. It is your mind, and your mind is “everything that is good and everything that is essential.”21

You next visualize your mind in the form of this sphere of white light shooting upwards out of the top of your head—exclaiming “PHAT” as you do so. Once your mind has exited your body, you envision it taking the form of Vajrayogini—or sometimes another deity or spirit—and that you, embodied as the sphere, truly are Vajrayogini. In this form, you watch as your corpse falls over and lies on the ground before gesturing at your corpse with a hooked knife in your right hand. The gesture makes the top of the skull fly off and flip over, growing in size until it is as large as a galaxy. It becomes an enormous skull-cup or kapala (thod phur).22

You, in the form of Vajrayogini, then proceed to pick up your corpse with the hooked knife and place it into the enormous kapala. At another gesture from the knife, your corpse dissolves into a red mass of blood and flesh, which is similar to a fresh and warm uncooked stew. As this occurs, you visualize a white “OM,” a red “AH,” and a blue “HUM” appearing over the kapala—these represent the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas. These three syllables dissolve into the kapala one by one and transform its contents into ambrosia, changing the color as they dissolve until it becomes a sort of pink with a blue gleam. The mass in the kapala is now wisdom ambrosia that contains not only your corpse, but also the essence of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas due to the three syllables.23 This mass of ambrosia, sometimes also called nectar, is the ideal food. It is intrinsically positive in taste, nutrition, and every other element. It contains within it “everything that any kind of being would ever want or need to eat.”24

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18 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November, 2016.; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
19 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
In most Chöd practices you would then summon the ‘guests’—various deities and spirits—to come and feast upon the nectar that you have created from your body. You would then proceed to offer the nectar that you have created from your body to the inhabitants of each of the six realms that are thought to exist in Tibetan Buddhism—the god realm, the demigod realm, the human realm, the animal realm, the realm of the hungry ghosts, and hell. By offering this nectar you would get many blessings. In this particular practice, however, the multicolored or mixed feast, you do not need to forcefully summon the guests. Instead, you simply bring them to mind and the guests appear in the sky beside you.

Once this has been accomplished, you envision an innumerable amount of dākinīs who look like Vajrayogini emerging from the heart of yourself, which is still indistinguishable from Vajrayogini. These dākinīs are carrying small kapala, which they fill with the ambrosia that you have created from your own corpse and present it to the various guests that have appeared. The dākinīs slowly descend through the six realms and feed the ambrosia to all sentient beings of the six realms. The ambrosia gets offered not only to those assembled in front of you, but also to all deities and beings no matter where they are. As this process occurs, you envision that all the deities and beings that have received the ambrosia are pleased and satisfied. This concludes the process of visualization, having successfully offered your body as a feast to the various deities and beings as an act of compassion.

Beyond the visualizations, Chöd is still contains other important and nuanced components; it is not a simple meditative act, but more like a way of thinking. It has been described to me as an “all day practice,” which is not easy. According to Kalsang Tso, Chöd can be divided into two parts: methods practice and liberation practice. Sonam Dorjee, another Chodpa, described these two parts as the “how”—methods practice—and the “why”—liberation practice. Methods practice includes the offering of material things and the offering of the body through meditation and visualizations. It can be referred to as ‘external Chöd’—the various ritual practices that are involved and that happen at definable times such as playing the instruments and doing the visualizations. On the other hand, liberation practice essentially involves being aware of your mind, body, and speech at all times. It can be referred to as ‘internal Chöd,’ and it is meant to help you to be aware of and avoid the three poisons (dug gsum). The two fit together; methods practice allows you to earn merit to counteract previous negative karma, and liberation practice helps you to stop from gaining more negative karma. In this paper, I have focused more on the methods practice.

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25 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
26 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
29 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
30 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
31 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
32 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
The Chödpa

This section serves as a brief introduction to the various Chöd practitioners with whom I interacted. Understanding their various backgrounds is important to constructing a more complete understanding of where their views on Chöd come from. There are many different kinds of Chöd, with interpretations and different specific practices that vary from teacher to teacher and from practitioner to practitioner. There is not really one specific way of interpreting things such as the symbolic meanings of instruments or the way that you are meant to play the instruments. The different traditions and lineages of Chöd provided a complex and varied background from which to pull information. Keeping in mind the different traditions that these practitioners adhere to and how long they have been practicing is helpful for understanding their perspectives and the opinions that shaped the information they were willing to share with me.

Kalsang Tso

Kalsang Tso was the first Chöd practitioner with whom I had an in-depth conversation. She was incredibly interested in the practice of Chöd and graciously helped as a translator when I Kalsang Tso has been practicing Chöd for around 3 years. She received permission to learn from Lopon Gyaltsetn, who began to teach her Dudjom Tersar (bdud 'joms gter gsar) Chöd, which she described as part of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. The type of Chöd that she practices, Dudjom Tersar Chöd, draws its name from the founder “Dudjom” and the word “Tersar,” which means ‘new treasure.’ It can also be called Dudjom Throma Chöd, wherein “Throma” is the name of the protector deity of the practice—the dākinī named Throma Nagmo (khros ma nag mo), ‘the Wrathful Dākinī’ or “Black Wrathful Lady.”33 Dudjom Tersar Chöd was founded by Dudjom Rinpoche (1904-1987), whose legacy was carried on by his son Dungsey Thinly Norbu Rinpoche and his grandson Dungsey Garab Rinpoche, who appointed Lopon Gyaltsetn. Prior to Dudjom Rinpoche there was Dudjom Lingpa (1835-1904), who revealed the information.

In regards to Kalsang Tso, she was drawn to Chöd after being exposed to it by her uncle, who is also a Chödpa. She was particularly struck by the music, which she said caught her ear and was beautiful. This fascination with the music helped draw her to the practice and she decided to undertake a month-long class under Lopon Gyaltsetn, who also used to lead two practices every month that she has attended. These classes are held on Guru Rinpoche Day on the 10th of the month and on Dākinī Day on the 25th of the month according to the Tibetan calendar. According to Kalsang Tso, these days are specific to Dudjom Tersar Chöd. These practices are the main times she performs Chöd. She said that she does not yet go practice in “scary” places. In terms of the music, she is now proficient in the melodies as well as in playing the bell and damaru, but she has not yet acquired a kangling. While Kalsang Tso said that she would describe herself as ngakma, a type of Tantric practitioner, she seemed to indicate that she was not very deep into Vajrayāna practice.34

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33 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016; Hubert Decler in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
34 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
Sonam Dorjee

Sonam Dorjee is another Chödpa from Boudha with whom I was able to speak. He said that he is also sometimes called Kunsang Dorjee, a religious name given to him by a Lama. The type of Chöd that he practices is called the Laughter of the Dākinīs (*mkha’ gro’i gda rgyangs*), which he described as coming from a set of four volumes called Nyingtik Yabshi. The meaning of this title is the “Fourfold Innermost Spirituality.” In describing the origins of this type of Chöd, Sonam Dorjee said it began with Guru Rinpoche, who gave knowledge to the Tibetan King Trisong Detsen and Khando Yeshi Tsogyal; however, at that time there was not yet enough merit in the world, so the knowledge was hidden. Guru Rinpoche is said to have hidden the knowledge as one of his “treasures” in the Stupa in Boudha. Years later, the treasure was revealed by a yogi named Jigme Lingpa (*’jigs med gling pa*), who was guided to it by a prophecy or prophetic dream. After acquiring the knowledge, however, he kept it hidden. This remained the state of affairs until a student of Jigme Lingpa had his own dream that Jigme Lingpa had found the teachings from Guru Rinpoche. This student got Jigme Lingpa to share it, and these teachings became Nyingtik Yabshi. It should be noted that this is a newer version, as there was an old version of Nyingtik Yabshi created by Longchenpa.

Sonam Dorjee seemed to have great respect for Chöd and to take it very seriously—referring to it as a “very powerful” thing. In his words, giving the body as an offering allows one to attain more merit than any other offering, for the body is priceless. While Chöd is therefore very effective, it is not very easy. There are many vows that Vajrayāna practitioners need to keep, and there are some things that cannot be told, such as when he goes to perform Chöd. In Sonam Dorjee’s opinion, the purpose of Chöd—cutting the ego—is a very difficult thing to achieve. It is nevertheless worthwhile. The respect that he holds for the practice was easy to see given the detail with which he was able to describe the all-important visualizations that are so key to the practice of Chöd and the conditions that he gave to me for helping me to learn. Before we got into much detail, Sonam Dorjee told me that I was welcome to use his information, but not for the purpose of increasing my own fame or power—I could only use the information for the benefit of all sentient beings. Hopefully this paper fits the bill.

Kalsang Ngodub

Kalsang Ngodub is another man living in Boudha who performs Chöd. He is sometimes called Rinzin Norbu, the religious name given to him by a Lama. For the past 15 years he has been practicing a type of Chöd belonging to the *shi gcod* lineage, which is associated with Pa Dampa Sangyé and “pacification.” The specific type of practice that he follows is called *gcod nyo rdar ma seng* ge. He first learned Chöd from Lama Tsering Wangdu Norbu Rinpoche, who used to be here in Boudha. On the origins of his type of Chöd, he explained that *shi gcod* comes from the tradition of Pa Dampa Sangyé through Machik Labdrön. He further explained that Chöd of this sort is referred to as male Chöd and is part of the combined sutra-tantra tradition; after Machik Labdrön, types of Chöd referred to as female chöd also emerged.

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35 Hubert Decleer in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
36 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
37 Hubert Decleer in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
38 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
39 Hubert Decleer in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
Kalsang Ngodub also had great respect for the practice of Chöd and was incredibly humble. He went so far as to say that he would be more comfortable calling himself a ‘beggar’ than calling himself a ‘Chödpa,’ as he feels like he is not realized enough to merit the term. He was happy to speak with me—although he too wanted to make sure I was doing my research to help people—but said that I should find some ‘real’ Chödpas as well. As became clear from his humble bearing, he does not consider Chöd easy. He made the observation that people often say Chöd is a fast way to achieve enlightenment, but he wanted to make sure I understood that it was still a process—it was not something that could be accomplished in a day. Chöd is not easy.\footnote{Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.}

He expressed some concern about the increasing number of people that are practicing Chöd. He recollected that ten years ago there were not that many Chödpa here in Boudha, but now there are a very large number. Once again showing his respect for the practice, Kalsang Ngodub laid bare his concern that Chöd is becoming too ‘promotional’ in a sense or to ‘commotional’—that the essence of Chöd is being lost because people lack sincerity in the practice. Perhaps some of the newer practitioners are too swept up in the performative aspect of it or lack sincerity in their desire to truly use the practice to cut away the self. In Kalsang Ngodub’s words, Chöd is an “all-day practice,” and it is dangerous to do Chöd without sincerity. While he has found Chöd to be the best method in his search for truth, he worries about the current state of the practice and the community of Chöd practitioners.\footnote{Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.}

The Chant Master

I was able to speak with the Chant Master (\textit{dbu mdzad}) of a local monastery, who asked that his exact identity be kept anonymous. I was fortunate enough to have the help of Kalsang Tso as a translator, for the Chant Master’s ability to speak English was not perfect. Through Kalsang Tso, the Chant Master told me that he has been a Chöd practitioner for around three years. He identified his type of Chöd as Tsok Lay Rinchen Trinwan (\textit{tsogs las ring chen phring ba}); however, he added that he also practices Chokling Tersar (\textit{mchog gling gter gsar}), which is a revealed treasure. He and said that the lineage came from Chokling Rinpoche and the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This type of Chöd was brought to his monastery by a Rinpoche, who then proceeded to empower many high Lamas at the monastery.\footnote{Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator; Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.}

The position of Chant Master is a respected role in monastic life—a role that is often highly desired among the monks of a monastery.\footnote{Eben Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders: Instrumental Music and Creativity in Tibetan Buddhist Ritual,” (Independent Study Project Collection, 2011): 16.} His most important responsibility is to know all of the vocal chants and instrumental music that are performed at the monastery.\footnote{Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders,” 15.} Within this role, the Chant Master acts as a sort of conductor for ritual performances, albeit one who is also active in the rituals.\footnote{Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders,” 15.} He functions as the lead instrumentalist and lead vocalist in ritual ensembles, directing vocally through his singing and instrumentally through his playing on instruments such
as the cymbals (*rol mo*). Other performers in the ritual listen to his singing and playing as well as actually watching the Chant Master in order to follow his directions.

The Chant Master who I met was involved not only in leading the ritual ensemble of the monastery, but also in giving a series of classes on Chöd for anyone interested. I was able to attend two of the classes and witness his style of teaching. It was interesting to see that the vast majority of people attending the two classes that I sat in on were foreigners from the West, at least some of whom were studying at the monastery. The class was therefore conducted with the aid of a translator, who translated Chant Master’s Tibetan into English. The class was structured for those just beginning the practice and many who attended did not have the instruments like the damaru or the bell. In this classroom setting, the Chant Master filled a similar role to the one that he fills in an ensemble setting—guiding the music, both vocally and instrumentally—as well as filling the additional role of instructor.

Anonymous 5

Anonymous 5 is another Chöd practitioner who also asked to be kept anonymous. They have been practicing Chöd for around two years. They work at the same monastery as the Chant Master and seems to perform one of the same types of Chöd as he does. They told me that their lineage of Chöd comes from Chokling Rinpoche and is referred to as “Tersar.” They said that their type of Chöd was more completely called Tersar Lujin Chöd (*gter gsar lus sbyin gcod*). They later told me that their type of Chöd was from the Dudjom Tersar lineage, so it is not entirely clear to me exactly what type they practice. In trying to clarify, I asked about their learning experience, and they told me that they were taught by the Chant Master. This would seem to indicate that they likely practice the same type of Chöd as the Chant Master does. In this case, it would be the type that comes from Chokling Rinpoche, referred to by the Chant Master as Chokling Tersar.

Anonymous 5 was very humble about their experience in Chöd. They informed me that so far they still only do group practice and has not yet learned to play the kangling. They clearly seemed to consider themselves a modest student of the practice, yet nonetheless had a great deal of knowledge. Anonymous 5 has had a great deal of exposure to Chöd, besides during their own performance. For instance, at the monastery where they work, they have seen others do another type of Chöd that lasts almost a whole day, rather than the hour or so that their practice takes. This particular longer type of Chöd is known as the Jewel Garland of the Chöd Liturgy (*tshogs las rin po che’i phreng ba*). Anonymous 5 noted that the music in this longer practice resembles that of the music done in pujas for peaceful deities. They went on to say that most of the music done during Chöd at their monastery is done in the peaceful style, but they have infrequently heard other styles of Chöd where the music is like that done for wrathful deities.

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48 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
49 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
50 Anonymous 5, message to author, November 23, 2016.
52 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
The Instruments Used in Chöd

Ritual music in Tibetan Buddhism is distinguished from secular music by the association of specific symbolic meaning with the musical sounds and the instruments used to produce them.53 That being said, there are a large number of possible meanings for every symbol, and these meanings differ depending upon one’s viewpoint and specific tradition.54 This should be kept in mind when examining the various instruments involved in Chöd. Unique and new interpretations of symbolism, particularly in Vajrayāna rituals, often comes from an individual adept’s insights gained through meditative practice.55 In many cases, but particularly in the case of Chöd, different lineages’ interpretive communities feature advanced practitioners who add to the body of accepted symbolic interpretations through written works and oral teachings on the insights they have gained through their extended meditation.56 The wide variety of interpretations is further explained by bearing in mind the large number of monastic traditions and individual practitioners that existed across a diverse area of Tibet as practices like Chöd were passed down.57 Given this background, the various practices and symbolism associated with the instruments in Chöd may not be applicable to all traditions and may contradict each other in various places. Symbolism is different for different practitioners and is constantly evolving.

Instruments within Tibetan music have typically been divided based upon the way they are played. The categories that they have usually been placed into are instruments that are ‘beaten’ (brdung ba), ‘rung’ (‘khol ba), ‘blown’ (‘bud pa), and ‘stringed’ (rgyud can).58 Of these four categories, all are used in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music with the exception of the stringed instruments—which are perhaps considered too distracting.59 The instruments used in Chöd are categorically representative of the instruments used in Tibetan Buddhist monastic ensembles—featuring a membranophone like the damaru (da ma ru)—a beaten instrument, a metallophone like the bell (dril bu)—a rung instrument, and an aerophone like the kangling (rkang gling)—a blown instrument.60 These are the three instruments that are said to be used in Chöd. Depending upon how you look at it, a fourth instrument called the dorje (rdo rje) is also used, but it and the bell seem to be considered as one.

The Damaru

The damaru is an hourglass-shaped drum that has two small beads at the ends of strings that strike the two drumheads of the damaru. The drum is held in the right hand and rotated back and forth in order to make the strikers swing around the drum and hit the drumheads. The damaru, along with the bell, is often recognized as one of the most ‘ritualistic’ and symbolic instruments

54 Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 76.
56 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 114.
57 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 115.
used in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music.\textsuperscript{61} They are often more independent than other instruments when used in ritual ensemble music at monasteries.\textsuperscript{62} Within Chöd practice in particular, the damaru is used to help maintain the practitioners focus. It is also thought to help stop outside intrusions of negative thoughts or activities.\textsuperscript{63}

The damaru is sometimes classified alongside bells as a ‘rung’ instrument rather than as a ‘struck’ instrument.\textsuperscript{64} Based upon the way that it is played, however, via the concussive force of the strikers, it could easily be considered as a ‘struck’ instrument.\textsuperscript{65} There are two main types of damaru, the “big damaru” (\textit{da chen}) and the “small damaru” (\textit{da chung}).\textsuperscript{66} The larger damaru is used exclusively in the practice of Chöd, while the smaller damaru is used in a variety of rituals.\textsuperscript{67} There is also a slight divide by gender, where men often play larger damaru than the women, but this is not an enforced guideline.\textsuperscript{68} Damaru are typically made of wood with animal skin from animals like goats used as the drumhead. Some damaru are made out of sandalwood, acacia wood or ivory.\textsuperscript{69} Damaru can also sometimes be made out of two human skulls, which is then given the special name of \textit{thod rnga}.\textsuperscript{70} The damaru made of human skulls is highly valued for its appeal to Fierce deities.\textsuperscript{71}

Background Information on the Damaru

According to some, the damaru’s earliest recorded history was amongst the Harrapan civilization of the Indus valley. It is present in the artifacts and clay seals left behind by the Harrapan civilization.\textsuperscript{72} Some of these were found at Mohenjo-Daro in particular.\textsuperscript{73} In these early depictions, it is often represented as an emblem of Shiva, the Hindu deity. The damaru that is used by Buddhists is similar to the early forms used in India, but is more compressed in shape and has drumheads that are glued on rather than being held on with a lattice of string. Not only the wooden damaru, but also those made of skulls can be traced back to India.\textsuperscript{74} To a degree, the Damaru can be traced back to Indian roots through the \textit{thod rnga}, the damaru made of the tops of human skulls. Oftentimes, the skull drum and the kangling are thought of as uniquely Tibetan instruments; however, these instruments are actually Indian in origin.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{61} Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound,” 642.
\textsuperscript{62} Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound,” 643.
\textsuperscript{63} Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
\textsuperscript{64} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{65} Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders,” 20.
\textsuperscript{67} Scheidegger, \textit{Tibetan Ritual Music}, 53.
\textsuperscript{68} Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{69} Scheidegger, \textit{Tibetan Ritual Music}, 54.
\textsuperscript{70} Scheidegger, \textit{Tibetan Ritual Music}, 54.
\textsuperscript{71} Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound,” 642.
\textsuperscript{73} Hubert Declerq in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
\textsuperscript{74} Beer, \textit{Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs}, 258.
In India during the first millennium C.E., there was a religious movement known as the Kāpālikas, which has been said to mean “skull-bearers” or perhaps “skull people.” Over a long period of time, this movement became more like a caste and less like a religious movement, but the actions they took when they were still primarily religious practitioners is key. The practitioners in this movement used ornaments and artifacts made of human bone as a means of shocking people into taking life and their religious practice more seriously—confronting people with death was the means of accomplishing this goal. Alongside these bone ornaments and artifacts, the Kāpālikas developed two instruments referred to in Sanskrit as the ‘kāpāla-damru,’ meaning the “skull hourglass-drum,” and the ‘majja-vamśa,’ meaning the “bone-marrow [excavated from the bone to make an open tube] flute.” When rendered in Tibetan, these terms for these two instruments came to be called the thod rnga and the rkang gling. When these two instruments were first introduced into Tibet by Indian Buddhists, some Tibetans were critical and derided them as negative or even evil influences from India. As time went on and Tibetans began to accept the instruments and make them more easily due to their practices of leaving corpses exposed at ‘sky-burial’ sites, the opposite occurred in India, where Indian burial customs changed and Indians began denouncing the bone instruments as signs of “Tibetan savagery,” an interesting reversal.

Symbolism of the Damaru

The damaru has been described as “a microcosmic embodiment of the basic structure of the universe and of sentient life,” a thorough investigation of which “encompasses the entire scope of Buddhist philosophy and meditation.” The instrument is often understood as a reminder of impermanence and emptiness. In Chöd, it can be said to cut doubts and expectations from the self. It is understood by advanced practitioners to not only symbolize, but also produce the sound of emptiness—sound is produced, but it is impermanent and therefore lacks self-existence. Some ways of playing the damaru can pertain to the 18 kinds of emptiness. For the less advanced, the opposing sides of the damaru can be held to symbolize the conventional and ultimate truths, while the beads that strike the drumheads can be conceptualized as the ultimate nature of the mind.

There are several types of ornamentation that are sometimes attached to the damaru, one of the most symbolic of which seems to be the strip of cloth that sometimes hangs from the handle. Oftentimes, this decoration is made up of five colors, which can be said to represent the five Buddha families. Sometimes people attach other things to this strip of cloth. For instance, some people attach the hair of dākinīs, described in this instance as the consorts of Rinpoches, to the

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77 Hubert Decler in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
82 Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 63.
83 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 127; Beer, Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs, 259.
84 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
85 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 44.
86 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016.
87 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 44.
88 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
decorations on the handle. When this is done, there are often two bits of hair on either side of the handle—one side has hair from a living dākinī, and the other side has hair from a dead dākinī.89

The great Tibetan yogi and poet Milarepa is said to have produced an intriguing song that speaks about the symbolism of the damaru and speaks more generally about the variability of symbolism. The story goes that Milarepa was staying in the Lion Cave of Tag Tsang when he was approached by four ascetic yogins, who were shocked by his ability and experience. They asked for his advice and information about their clothing and the damarūs that they carried—they had been asked to sing a song “exemplifying” these objects during their travels and had been unable to do so, which led to ridicule and derision from their questioners.90

In response to their questions Milarepa sang a number of stanzas describing their clothing and the damaru. For instance, one such stanza reads as follows:

“The thin waist of the damaru-drum
Marks the place of error and doubt
Where samsara and nirvana meet;
The widening out of the two skull-rims
Is like the waxing and waning of samsara and nirvana.”91

Milarepa goes on to describe many other qualities of the damaru before making the following admonition to the ascetics:

“Do you get my meaning, ascetics?
Listen further, friends:
Without encountering a good lama,
Without instructions, precepts, and experience,
One is led by the appearances of this mundane life.

Though you have a yogin’s form,
If you don’t have good qualities of realization,
Wearing that white hat on your head
Is like whitewashing charcoal.”92

After this admonition he goes through each characteristic that he described previously, but identifies its symbolic aspects differently. For instance, when it comes to the damaru he says:

“The thin waist of the damaru-drum
Indicates your extreme paucity of wisdom;
Its widening out to the two skull rims
Shows how your sin and evil actions increase.”93

89 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
In doing so he turns what was once positive into a negative parallel.

This sequence of events in the tale of Milarepa is particularly interesting in terms of the message that it gives about symbolism in terms of the damaru and more generally. At its most basic level, it shows that symbols are not static and monolithic structures. The way that symbols are interpreted, the meaning attached to them, varies from person to person and from circumstance to circumstance. In the first stanza that Milarepa gives about the damaru he identifies the meaning that it might have for a sincere and genuine yogin. He admonishes the ascetics to whom he is speaking to make sure that they receive the correct training and become sincere yogins, not just people with the physical outward form of yogins. If they fail in this endeavor and are not genuine and do not come to possess the “good qualities of realization,” then rather than symbolizing important ideas of their practice, the damaru will come to represent their “paucity of wisdom” and their increasing “sin and evil actions.”

The meaning of the damaru or indeed of any symbol can be expressed differently depending upon what the teachers wish to express to their students. The particular background and situation of the teacher as well as that of the student shapes what will be emphasized and divulged.

Milarepa makes his point explicit to the four ascetics at the end of his song, when he proclaims:

“That was my song
About the three articles of ascetics—
Hat, headband, and damaru-drum—
Taking their details as examples.

It should be an iron goad
For yogins who have realization,
Provisions for those who wander the countryside,
Food for those seeking sustenance,
Nourishment for those in retreat,
A companion for those living along,
And a standard for the masses.

You yogins who don’t have realization,
Who wander the ends of the earth searching for food—
You will take the first set of examples
As the accomplice of imposters.
Use it to sate your rapacious hunger!
Use it as a crutch for lack of ability!
Hawk it as a treasure in the market!
Sing it as your song to the ten directions!

The second series of examples
Reveals the hidden nature of imposters.
The wise should take it as an admonition.
The unrealized should take it as derision.
Children should make it their nursery rhyme.

It should be repeated all day long.

Prompted by the situation,
I composed this allegory of appearances,
Making both good and bad examples;
Did you understand or not?

If you did, let it urge you to virtue.
If not, it will upset your mind.
Please be patient at my teasing.
I’ve considered all this, and my mind is happy.”

In this final set of stanzas, Milarepa makes it clear to the four ascetics that if they take only the first set of examples then they shall do so as “imposters” of sorts. They should take the second set of examples, wherein the different articles are said to symbolize negative things, as an “admonition” to do better. Milarepa underlines its importance by describing how “Children should make it their nursery rhyme”—the implication being that they should take it to heart and allow it to urge them towards virtue. This interestingly mirrors the basic idea of Vajrayāna practice, where the negative is taken and transformed into the positive. The story goes that the four ascetics did indeed understand and were filled with strong faith, asking Milarepa to bless and teach them. After receiving his teachings, they practiced and ended up becoming unusually realized and renowned Yogins.

The different symbolic approaches were an effective teaching mechanism.

Important Qualities a Damaru Should Possess

When considering purchasing a damaru, there are several important qualities that it should have. Above all else, the most important thing is the sound; the damaru should have a good, clear sound. According to a woman who sold instruments at a local monastery, many damaru are made of acacia wood, which is cheaper than sandalwood but still produces a good sound. The drumhead is best if it is made of goat skin, but again, whatever makes a good sound is acceptable. Almost all the qualities of a damaru are subservient to the need for a good, clear sound. Even size is not necessarily important. There are many different sizes of damaru and various levels of ornamentation, but neither quality is particularly important—you should get what

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97 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016; Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5, message to author, November 23, 2016.
98 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
99 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
100 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
fits your hand and is most comfortable.101 There is traditionally, however, a big damaru that is
used more specifically for Chöd, and a smaller one for other rituals.102

Another important quality has to do not with the sound of the instrument, but with its
relation to religious practice. In order for a damaru to be effective for religious practice, it should
have several mantras written on the inside of the wooden body of the drum. These mantras should
also be blessed by a high monk or Lama. There are many options for these mantras, some of which
can be written in Sanskrit, but some of the most important include the mantras of the male dākinī
and the mantras of the female dākinī. The mantras for the male dākinī should be on the right, and
the mantra for the female dākinī should be on the left.103

## Playing the Damaru

Damaru are always held and played in the right hand. The thin middle section of the drum
is grasped by the thumb and index finger and the entire drum is rotated back and forth so that the
two beads that hang by strings off of the drum each strike a drumhead.104 During the lessons on
Chöd that I was able to attend at a local monastery, the Chant Master went into great detail about
the correct way to play the damaru. Among his most important instructions was an admonition
relating to the idea of balance. He described how the body itself should be straight and balanced,
as should the drum. The damaru should not be held too high or too low, instead it should be right
in the middle—this appeared to me to be a point where the top of the drum hovered at around the
height of the forehead or eyebrows. In addition to being at the right height, the damaru should not
be held too far away from the body.105

This idea of balance transferred into the movement and actual playing of the damaru as
well. The Chant Master described how you must make sure that the hand is balanced when you
are holding the damaru. It should not be held too loosely or too tightly and should not be played
to quickly or wildly; the correct manner of playing should be easy and comfortable. To accomplish
this, it is very important to have control of your hand during Chöd. The hand must turn in a
properly balanced way with consistent speed so that the damaru turns in the right manner. A
correct turn appeared to be a full 180-degree rotation of the drum. For a correct rotation of the
drum to be made, you must be sure not to let the damaru fall or waver when you turn it, this means
maintaining a balanced and consistent speed and not allowing the elbow to lift or fall either.
Failing to maintain this balance will mean that the damaru is not being played correctly. Often, if
both strikers are not making sound then you have an imbalance in speed or are not turning far
enough. This is one way to tell if you are having an issue with your playing.106

The Chant Master also described how, before you first start playing, the damaru should be
held in a ‘rest position’ of sorts. This rest position is done with the drum in the right hand and the
bell in the left by crossing the arms across the chest, with the right arm and hand holding the

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101 Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 73; Chöd class (taught by the Chant
Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang
Tso, November 8, 2016.
102 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
103 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
104 Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 73.
105 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant
Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
106 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant
Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
damaru on top of the arm and hand holding the bell. Once you actually begin to play, it is important that you start the motion of the drum by swinging it backwards, away from yourself, so that the strikers swing backwards first.\textsuperscript{107} Some Chöd practitioners of other traditions did this too, but this part of the practice at least is likely specific to particular traditions, as Tibetan literature and commentary on Chöd does not speak of the direction of rotation for the drum.\textsuperscript{108}

Musical Analysis and the Damaru

There are two types of sounds that are played on the damaru—‘beats’ (\textit{brdung}) and ‘ringing’ (\textit{khrol ba}).\textsuperscript{109} The sound of beats are made by a single twist of the damaru in one direction that makes each striker hit a drumhead or by a continued twist of the drum in alternating directions, which causes one strike on each of the drumheads.\textsuperscript{110} In other words, beats can be made by a single rotation of the damaru or by a back and forth rotation. Single beats can be thought of as being combined into numerical series called ‘counts’ (\textit{grangs}).\textsuperscript{111} The beats in any single series are of more or less equal lengths, but different series of beats can be combined—when this happens, the series respective beats may still differ in length.\textsuperscript{112} In contrast to beats, ringing is a more continuous sound. Ringing is produced by rapid clockwise-counterclockwise rotations of the drum, which produces a stream of rattling pulses from the strikers hitting the drumheads.\textsuperscript{113} Ringing sections seem to be used at more specialized times such as alongside a melody, which is either sung or played on the kangling, or when called for by non-musical reasons relating to the meditation.\textsuperscript{114} A section based on ringing may end with a cadence made up of several beats\textsuperscript{115}

From my own experience watching and listening to a group Chöd practice, there were two rhythmic patterns that I often heard played on the damaru and bell during the ritual practice. The first was very simple and appeared to be as follows:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{simple_rhythm}
\caption{Simple damaru rhythm.}
\end{figure}

Outside of this very simple rhythm, there was one other rhythm that I heard with some frequency:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{complex_rhythm}
\caption{Complex damaru rhythm.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{107} Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
\textsuperscript{108} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 132.
\textsuperscript{109} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 73.
\textsuperscript{110} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{111} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{112} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{113} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{114} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
\textsuperscript{115} Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” 74.
Given their simplicity, I felt comfortable transcribing these two rhythms. The only other rhythmic pattern I was able to recognize regularly came at the end of each section of instrumental playing. The Chöd practitioners ended each segment with a series of violent flicks of the instrument that caused a flurry of wild beats to emanate from the damaru. This ending sequence began with the tempo of the consistent quarter note beats on the damaru becoming faster and faster, culminating in this flurry of frantic beats. Afterwards, there would be a brief pause before another flurry of frantic beats, followed by a seemingly final end to that particular section, after which chanting would occur.

Some rhythms played on the damaru during Chöd were recorded by Daniel A. Scheidegger in his book *Tibetan Ritual Music*. See Image A in Appendix B for his transcription of the rhythmic patterns.

**Making a Damaru**

I was fortunate enough to get to speak with a man working in a shop that sells damaru and various other instruments. This man was experienced not only in selling damaru, but also in making them. He has been working at the shop, which is owned by his father, and making damaru in his free time for approximately 12 years. He learned the process for making damaru from his father and was kind enough to allow me to see part of his work. The entire process for making a damaru takes about two days, after which they can sell them to anyone who wants them—at this shop they mainly sold to Buddhist ritual practitioners, but they also sold a fair number to tourists. They make as many damaru as get ordered, and retain some in the shop.\(^\text{116}\)

The process for making a damaru begins by acquiring the right materials. The craftsmen at this shop get their wood from Gorkha or Tarai Hetauda in Nepal and the skin for the drumhead from India. They also have some damaru made out of plastic to use as samples. Once they have the wood the process for making the actual damaru beings. They start off with a large, round piece of wood. The first step in the process is to take this lump of wood and make it into the correct shape, which I was told took between one and a half to two hours to do. After the wood is in the correct shape to be a damaru, they stain the wood. While this woodcarving is occurring, they are soaking the skins for the drumhead—which are made from goat skin—in water. They need to soak for about one and a half days.\(^\text{117}\)

Once the skin has soaked long enough, they place black tape on the edge of the wood where the drumhead will be attached. They then put the skin on the drum. The two drumheads on opposing sides of the drum get held on at first by sewing the them together with stitches that reach across the center of the damaru. They use a thick thread that goes back and forth in a big series of “V” shaped zig zags. This stitching holds the drumheads on while they are wet. When they dry they stay put on their own. After they have dried a little bit, the drumheads get painted and are allowed to dry overnight. After this is done the stitching gets removed and different decorations are affixed to the damaru. Once this has been done, the damaru is completed and is ready to be sold.\(^\text{118}\)

\(^{116}\) Anonymous 3 (damaru maker) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 7, 2016.

\(^{117}\) Anonymous 3 (damaru maker) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 7, 2016.

\(^{118}\) Anonymous 3 (damaru maker) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 7, 2016.
Images of the Damaru

*A top down view of the various mantras in a damaru*
Goat skin that will be used for drumheads soaking in water

Several damaru that have had the drumheads put on and stitched together
A side view of a damaru that has recently had its drumhead attached

A top down view of a damaru that has recently had its drumhead attached
Several Damaru that have been freshly painted and are waiting to dry

One of the plastic damaru that are used as samples
A large damaru used by a Chödpa with various ornaments attached to it

A small damaru used by a Chödpa with various ornaments attached to it
The Bell and Dorje

The bell and the dorje are unique and important instruments in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music; they are indispensable to ritual practices and have great symbolic importance. They can in some ways be considered different and separate instruments, but the two are always played together. All the people I talked to said that there are three instruments used in Chöd, but when they listed them they listed four, but did so as if listing them as three—the drum, the bell and dorje, and the kangling. They considered the bell and dorje as if they were one. This perhaps has to do in part with the complementary symbolism of the two implements and the way that they are always played together. The dorje, also referred to in Sanskrit as the vajra, does not physically make a sound, but is nonetheless considered an instrument. It is said to make sound that is audible to the various gods and deities who may be listening, even if it is silent in this physical realm.

In Chöd in particular, the dorje is not always played, since the bell is played with the damaru, but it nonetheless needs to be present. When the damaru is not being used, the dorje needs to take its place—the bell cannot be played on its own. When not in use, the dorje ought to nonetheless be nearby on the table. During shorter practices the dorje may not be played at all, but during longer practices it is often used in conjunction with the bell. While the dorje is not always used, it still deserves mention as an instrument used in Chöd. If nothing else, it is always present, and it is often played alongside the bell. In Chöd practice in particular, the bell is thought to tame or summon dākinīs, and the dorje is thought of as a powerful instrument that is useful in a variety of ways.

Background Information on the Bell and Dorje

There are several different specific types of bell that comes from the areas in and around Tibet. To a degree, these specific types are distinguished by their size, ornamentation, and place of origin. There are nine specific types of bell that are particularly well known. The rgya dril and rgya chu thig ma are two types that have traditionally come from China, the sdi dgi sha rkang ma and chos rgyal dril bu have come from the principality of Derge in Kham in eastern Tibet, the myang dril has come from India, and the theg chon dril bu, rgyud sde 'og m'i dril bu, rgyud sde gong m'i dril bu, and rlung dril have come from elsewhere in Tibet. Traditionally, Tibetan bells have been individually cast from bronze through a technique called sand-casting. In this method, two molds are made for the bell casing out of fine sand that has been compressed and bound

120 Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders,” 20; Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
123 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016; Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
124 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
125 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
126 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
127 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
together with radish juice or raw brown sugar. These molds are used to make the bell, which in this form would be blank; however, different metal stamps are used to imprint various designs into the outer sand mold before the bell is cast.\textsuperscript{130} This process allows different designs to be made, such as a ring of dorjes or dharma wheels.

The dorje, or vajra, also has a long history. The name of the instrument, the dorje, means ‘the lord of stones’ when translated from Tibetan, and the Sanskrit name, the vajra, means ‘the hard or mighty one’—implying that there it is related to the indestructible state of enlightenment.\textsuperscript{131} The history of the dorje can be traced back to India, where it was probably used as both a weapon and a scepter.\textsuperscript{132} It has a long history of religious use in ancient India, where it was believed to be the weapon the of god Indra. Buddhist legend relates that Shakyamuni took the vajra used by Indra and forced its open prongs together to form the more peaceful scepter used by Buddhists.\textsuperscript{133}

In the past, dorjes that were made in Tibet were often made from meteoric iron, which ties into its symbolic representation as the indivisibility of form and emptiness.\textsuperscript{134}

**Symbolism of the Bell and Dorje**

The bell and dorje are viewed as symbols of commitment and need to be treated with respect.\textsuperscript{135} They are considered to be an indivisible pair that represent “wisdom” and “method” or “wisdom” and “skillful means,” as well as representing the “Nondivided Being of phenomena and nothingness.”\textsuperscript{136} They furthermore represent the different aspects of the female and male genders.\textsuperscript{137} Put together, the bell and dorje can also be thought of as representing ‘emptiness’ and ‘compassion,’ which are important concepts to focus on during ritual practice.\textsuperscript{138} The handle of the bell is often shaped like a dorje, thus physically combining the two instruments to a degree and sharing their symbolic aspects. Each are important symbols both when considered together and when considered apart.

The bell, for instance, is said to symbolize wisdom or the realization of emptiness.\textsuperscript{139} It is the female aspect of the pair of instruments.\textsuperscript{140} Perhaps as such, it has the face of a deity, which is sometimes said to be the consort of Buddhas, below the top of the handle that is shaped like a dorje. This deity can be one of many and the specific deity is not of the utmost importance, but some practices do require a specific one to be present.\textsuperscript{141} Some bells have a sort of hole or ring of metal within the handle, which can symbolize emptiness—these bells are often used for the

\textsuperscript{132} Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 234.
\textsuperscript{133} Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 234.
\textsuperscript{134} Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 234.
\textsuperscript{135} Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{136} Scheidegger, *Tibetan Ritual Music*, 38; Nata, 11/7/16
\textsuperscript{137} Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
\textsuperscript{138} Yonnetti, “Like the Roar of a Thousand Thunders,” 22.
\textsuperscript{139} Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 44.
\textsuperscript{140} Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 234; Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
\textsuperscript{141} Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016; Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
Some bells have decorations shaped like the umbrella used to shield Rinpoches from the sun or decorations shaped like the dorje. The bells with the dorje image are referred to as a vajrasatva bell and is considered to be a combination of many gods, perhaps as many as 100 gods combined into one in the form of the bell. Some bells have images other than those mentioned here. As a whole, the bell can be viewed as a mandala of sorts, consisting of the Body, Speech and Mind, and the realm of gzhal med khang.

Completing the pairing of instruments, the vajra represents the male aspect as well as symbolizing “method” or “skillful means.” The dorje usually has either five prongs or nine prongs on either end—the same is true of the end of the handle of the bell, which is shaped like a dorje. The five prongs are often understood to represent the five Buddha families, while the nine prongs are sometimes thought to represent the nine yanas—‘vehicles’ of the path to enlightenment—or the eight male and female Buddhas, with the central prong left out of the count. Just like the bell, the vajra sometimes has the face of a deity on it.

Important Qualities the Bell and Dorje Should Possess

As a pair, there are several qualities that should be kept in mind when purchasing a bell and dorje. First and foremost, the two should be the same size in the sense that the handle of the bell should match and be the same size as the dorje. In order to help with this, the two implements should be bought together if at all possible. The specific number of prongs, decorations, or deity on the bell and dorje do not matter very much—which one you get is largely a matter of personal preference, although some specific traditions do call for specific deities or specific decorations to be present. These days, the best bells and dorjes are said to come from Dehradun in India. Some practitioners enlist the help of their teachers or other monks or lamas in order to be sure they are getting good quality bells and dorjes.

In the case of the bell in particular—and perhaps in the case of the dorje, although it would be difficult to judge—the most important quality is the sound, much like with the damaru. When trying to select a bell, or judging whether or not it is good, one should focus intently on the sound, which should be clear and sharp. Kalsang Ngodub explained that one way to judge the clarity and quality of the sound is to ring the bell and then listen to a sort of “wah wah” oscillating sound.

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142 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
143 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
146 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
147 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Beer, *Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 236.
149 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
150 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
151 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
152 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
154 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016; Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
that comes when you open and close your mouth near the bell. This sound lets you determine if the bell has good resonance and a good sound. On a number of occasions people tried to sell me bells and often attempted to prove their quality and worth by doing this very test—ringing the bells either by striking them or by running a wooden dowel across the rim and then opening and closing their mouth near the still ringing bell so that I might hear the oscillating sound.

Playing the Bell and Dorje

The bell is always held in the left hand—the female hand, and the dorje, when it gets played, is held in the right hand—the male hand. The bell is played in the same basic rhythm and tempo as the damaru. The chant master, for instance, appeared to hit the bell at the same time as the drum beats occurred. The bell seemed to be played by being struck on the same side of the bell each time—a motion that was like “down, down, down” rather than “down, up, down.” When it is being played with the damaru, the bell should be held in front of the player’s heart center. During these times, the dorje, which is not being played, should still be present nearby—perhaps on the table in front of the practitioner.

When it comes time for the bell and dorje to be played together, there is a specific way that they should be picked up, since both it and the bell are symbols of commitment and must be treated with respect. To pick it up correctly, you must pick up the dorje with the right hand, which is thought of as the clean hand, and then pick up the bell in the right hand as well. You then pass the bell from the right hand to the left hand, thus preparing yourself to play in a respectful manner. When both are being played in this way, the dorje should be held near the heart. Strictly speaking, there is no correct way of grasping the dorje; however, I was able to observe various Chöd pas performing Chöd and noticed how they held it. This was primarily when they were performing hand mudras with the dorje.

The most common way of holding the dorje seemed to be gripping it by the lower half of the instrument—holding it pointing upwards into the air near their hearts—with their thumb on one side and their other fingers on the other side. Their hand was often in a sort of “U” shape underneath the instrument so that not much of it was covered by the hand. Some people also grasped dorje gently with the whole hand, not bothering with any sort of “U” shape. The least common way seemed to be just holding it tightly in a fist. In the case of the bell, there also does not seem to be a uniform way of holding it, but in the instances I was able to observe some people held it with three fingers on one side and the thumb on the other—with the pinky finger not involved. Others held it with the index finger on the top of the handle and the remaining fingers

155 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
157 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 44.
158 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016.
159 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
161 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
162 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
163 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
164 Group Chöd practice observed by the author, November 9, 2016.
and the thumb grasping it lower down. For the most part, everyone seemed to hold the bell in such a way that their palms were facing inwards towards their own bodies.\textsuperscript{167}

Images of the Bell and Dorje

\begin{center}
\textit{A view from the top of a bell and dorje used by a Chödpa}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{167} Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016; Group Chöd practice observed by the author, November 9, 2016.
Two views of a bell and dorje used by a chödpā.
The Kangling

The kangling is the third instrument used in Chöd. Put simply, the kangling is a trumpet made out of a human thighbone. It is a more uniquely Vajrayāna instrument, which is often used in Tantric rituals involving Fierce deities.168 Perhaps in relation to this, the kangling is often thought to be used in subjugating activity and is an object of some power.169 Some have said that it is also used to cut the demons inside of you.170 Others have said that in Chöd in particular, the kangling is used to summon the various deities that are involved in the visualizations.171 The kangling is comprised of a bone from the thigh cut off about 30 cm. from the knee joint—two holes cut into the knobs of the knee joint, which forms the trumpet’s double bell. A shallow recess is cut into the other end of the segment of bone into which the player blows to create sound.172 Being made from human bones, the kangling is understandably treated with some secrecy. This is exacerbated in Nepal by the fact that kangling are apparently illegal to sell.173 Many Chöd practitioners at least had a great deal of knowledge about them, but did not wish to discuss them in great detail. During my research, I was able to witness various Chöd practitioners using kangling during the performance of Chöd.

Background Information on the Kangling

The kangling is mainly associated with practitioners of Chöd and various yogins and yoginis who practice in charnel grounds.174 In Tibetan Buddhism, it is associated with several protective deities such as ‘Red Mhakala with the thighbone trumpet’ or the goddess ‘Throma Nagmo,’ in her role as the protector of the charnel grounds for Chöd practitioners.175 Tibetan shamans and other practitioners have used the kangling in rituals of exorcism or weather control, for its sound is said to be pleasing to wrathful deities, but terrifying to evil spirits.176 Its use in Chöd, wherein various deities and spirits are called, is therefore not surprising. Its roots, like that of the damaru, can be traced back to India and the religious movement known as the Kāpālikas—the “skull-bearers”—in the first millennium C.E.177 The kangling was one of several instruments developed by the Kāpālikas that used human body parts as means of shocking people into taking their religious practice more seriously.178 Given the practice that emerged in Tibet of ‘sky-burial’ or the use of charnel grounds, these instruments were not extraordinarily difficult to make or acquire, even as they became somewhat looked down upon in India.179 For further information, see the section entitled “Background Information on the Damaru.”

169 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
170 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
171 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 144.
173 Anonymous 2 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 7, 2016.
175 Beer, Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs, 259.
176 Beer, Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs, 259.
In addition to the typical kangling made out of human thighbone, there is a substitute of sorts made out of copper that is sometimes used in monasteries. This copper substitute is referred to as the zang-kang (zangs rkang), and it is sometimes made out of gold or silver, if the monastery has enough wealth. Gold or silver is preferable, but copper is the most common. The zang-kang typically has an end that is in the shape of crocodile’s mouth. In addition to this relatively common copper zang-kang, there are several other possible substitutes for the kangling. These include the ra-kang (ra rkang)—which is made of the horn of a rhinoceros and is sometimes claimed to be made out of a unicorn horn, the shing-kang (shing rkang)—which is made out of wood, and the tsog-kang (tshogs rkang)—which is similar to the zang-kang, but has a larger ‘crocodile mouth’ at its end.

Symbolism and Important Qualities the Kangling Should Possess

The various qualities that are key to a good kangling are very important due to their symbolic aspects. Symbolism and important qualities cannot be easily differentiated; therefore, they have been combined into one section.

First and foremost, the most important quality of a kangling is whether or not it is actually made of a human thighbone. There are some reproductions of kangling that are made of wood or plastic, but it is best to use one that is actually made of human bone. Even among those that are true kangling made of human bone, there are some that are better than others. Characteristics such as the color, shape, and where it comes from are key to bear in mind. For instance, the best kangling are at least 16 or 17 years old. When it comes to color, bones that are white are the best, although I saw some Chödpas using kangling that were slightly tinged yellow or brown as well. If a bone is an unacceptable color or from an unacceptable source using it can arouse violence and cause unhappiness. Some kangling have the knee joint end painted red, but this is simply decoration and is not a key feature.

In addition to color, distinctions can also be made between those bones that come from the right leg and those that come from the left leg. The thighbone from the right leg of someone who has died in their prime with an “unimpaired intellect” is known as the “instrument of heroes,” while the thighbone from the left leg of such a person would be referred to as the “instrument of heroines.” The hero’s instrument can more specifically refer to the thighbone of an adult man who was killed by a weapon, and the thighbone of a qualified woman is sometimes referred to as

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180 Hubert Decler in discussion with the author, November 23, 2016.
185 Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Anonymous 1 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016; Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
186 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
187 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
189 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
the dākinī’s instrument. The choice of which bone to use is left somewhat open-ended—it ought to be whatever is appropriate to carry for that particular person and circumstance.

Bones that come from specific corpses are sometimes better than others. For instance, bones that come from the corpses of those that died from leprosy or starvation are not suitable as they might have black dots or be too light and lack marrow. As a general rule, the bones of particularly good people seem to be preferred for use as kangling. The bones of those who have great faults such as being quick to anger and committing murder should be avoided. There are actually three special types of kangling that are special based upon the individual who the bone came from. One type is made from the bone of a Bodhisattva and is said to encourage the aspiration to actualize Bodhicitta—this type is called byan chub sems rkang. The second type is called the bam rkang and is made from the bone of a woman who died when she was pregnant; the love that the mother could not give to her unborn child gives the bone an extra power that gets projected to the deities of protection. I was told that this type of kangling is actually the best and most powerful type. The third special type of kangling is the gri rkang, which is associated with two warriors dying in battle with their minds full of violence—the violence is harnessed during wrathful rituals to subdue evil spirits.

When it comes to the bone itself, there are some shapes that need to be present in order for the kangling to be good. These shapes are sometimes naturally present, but they can also be added to a certain extent. For example, the bone itself should be relatively straight. Furthermore the joint end of the kangling should be similar to the shape of the Tibetan letter cha—I was also told that one of the bulbs of the joint should be slightly larger than the other. The bulb on the right side of the instrument is the one that ought to be larger. This shape can sometimes occur naturally, but often it is made better through the use of gums and glue, which can be used to mold the shape of the bone. Near the joint end of the bone, there must also be a flat space just behind the bulbs of the knee joint. This flat space is important as it is the location where dākinīs will come to dance during Chöd. It is sometimes referred to as the “Dākinī’s Dancing Place.”

Further up along the bone from the knee joint there should also be at least one and perhaps two small indents that look almost like the imprint left in something soft by a pressing a fingernail into it. This small indent has been described as a meditation center for dākinīs or as representative of the “caves” of Padampa Sangyé and Machik Labdrön. It should be located somewhere on

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191 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 143.
192 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 143.
193 Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 23.
195 Harding, Machik’s Complete Explanation, 143.
198 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
200 Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 23.
201 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
202 Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 23.
203 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.
204 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
205 Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 23.
206 Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
the side of the instrument near the center of its length.\(^\text{207}\) Continuing up along the length of the bone, the end where the Chöd practitioner blows into the instrument should be shaped like the Tibetan letter ca.\(^\text{208}\) Sometimes, however, the end may be covered in an attached metal mouthpiece.\(^\text{209}\) Besides the ends, the entire length of the bone should have a sort of “sharp” or more pointed edge that runs along the top of the instrument. This pointed edge signifies wisdom and the sharp minds of people—some compared it to the symbolism of Manjushri’s sword.\(^\text{210}\)

Besides the symbolic shape, color, and origin, the most important feature of the kangling is its sound, like with the other instruments. It should produce a good clear sound, which a practitioner will eventually come to recognize from experience.\(^\text{211}\) Another easy way of testing the sound is to beat the mouthpiece with one hand and listen to the sound it produces. If this motion produces a brief hollow sound, then it is likely a good kangling.\(^\text{212}\)

### Playing the Kangling

The kangling is usually held in the left hand—the ‘wisdom’ hand—and is often played while the damaru is held in the right hand, the ‘method’ hand.\(^\text{213}\) When it comes time to play the kangling it is played from the left side of the mouth; the left side is used so that it does not hit the damaru, which may still be being played.\(^\text{214}\) During a group Chöd practice that I was able to observe, many people picked up the kangling and kept the bell in their left hand as well—they also continued to play the damaru.\(^\text{215}\) There was no elaborate means of picking up the instrument, unlike the ritualistic manner that ought to be used to pick up the bell and dorje. When the kangling were played during the group practice, the music, which often felt orderly and hypnotic, took on a more wild and tumultuous feel.

Various techniques and practices are important to playing the kangling. For instance, when first learning to play the instrument, beginners may produce a slight vibrato on the instrument by shaking their hand, but they later learn to create vibrato through their breath alone.\(^\text{216}\) Practitioners are also meant to keep in mind and think through four sacred syllables—Dza, Hūm, Bham, and Ho—while playing the kangling.\(^\text{217}\) Paired with these syllables are various rhythmic patterns that can be referred to as “three blows,” “four blows,” and “one blow.”\(^\text{218}\) For more information on the rhythmic patterns and syllables see Image B in Appendix B.

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\(^{208}\) Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.


\(^{210}\) Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016; Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.

\(^{211}\) Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.


\(^{214}\) Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 8, 2016.

\(^{215}\) Group Chöd practice observed by the author, November 9, 2016.


Musical Analysis and the Kangling

The kangling is used to play short melodies that are sometimes accompanied by the damaru.\textsuperscript{219} The melodies that are played on the kangling are said to be of the \textit{dbyangs} type, meaning that they are “composed of sequences of subtle modifications of pitch and loudness which fluctuate continuously rather than being separated into discrete levels.”\textsuperscript{220} These melodies are generated from mantras, which have significant ritual meaning, that are found in the ritual text; each melody is said to be an acoustic expression of the emotional character of the mantra from which it is generated.\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Dbyangs} melodies, which are also found in vocal chant, are very subtle and are made up of continuously varying slight modifications of pitch, coloration, and intonation.\textsuperscript{222} These kinds of melodies can be characterized as being on the high end of the spectrum of melodies, containing the most beauty, effectiveness, and depth of pitch.\textsuperscript{223}

Unlike with the other instruments involved in Chöd, the kangling sometimes has musical notation that is used by practitioners.\textsuperscript{224} This notation functions by graphically representing the intonational features of the melody line, although various notations are used that vary in style and types of symbols used.\textsuperscript{225} On way of writing this notation is by giving the lines that are drawn to represent the pitch the following characteristics—thickening lines that indicate increasing loudness and definiteness of the pitch, rising lines to indicate rising pitch, falling lines to indicate falling pitch, and a sharp angle between rising and falling lines to indicate an interruption such as a breath or a momentary leap to a higher pitch.\textsuperscript{226} There are various methods of using this type of notation.

There are some specific rhythmic patterns referred to as “three blows,” “four blows,” and “one blow” that are said to be used with the kangling.\textsuperscript{227} These rhythms used during Chöd were recorded by Daniel A. Scheidegger in his book \textit{Tibetan Ritual Music}. See Image B in Appendix B for his transcription of the rhythmic patterns.

Shopping for a Kangling in Boudha

When setting out to begin research on Chöd, I was curious to see how people acquired the various instruments used in the practice. Given the secretive and somewhat illicit nature of the kangling, discussing the process for making or acquiring kangling was not overly fruitful. For the most part those who did agree to speak about it wished to be kept anonymous.

Initially I was told by Kalsang Tso that she believes that some people donate their bodies to have their thighbones made into kangling, sort of like an offering to a Rinpoch.\textsuperscript{228} Bearing this in mind, I set out with Kalsang Tso to speak with shopkeepers in the area around Boudha, to see if anyone could tell me anything about kangling. At one shop that I stopped at, the owner agreed to speak with me, although he did not have much to say on the subject. At this shop they do not sell real kangling, but they do sell the fake ones made out of plastic or wood. The plastic ones at

\begin{table}
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\textbf{Reference} & \textbf{Citation} \\
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Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” \textit{71}. & \hline
Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” \textit{71}. & \hline
Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, “Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru,” \textit{71}. & \hline
Ellingson, “Tibetan Chant and Melodic Categories,” \textit{116}. & \hline
Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016. & \hline
Ellingson, “Tibetan Chant and Melodic Categories,” \textit{144}. & \hline
Ellingson, “Tibetan Chant and Melodic Categories,” \textit{148}. & \hline
Scheidegger, \textit{Tibetan Ritual Music}, \textit{26}. & \hline
Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016. & \hline
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\end{table}
least are actually made at the shop. They ordered the design and plastic material from India and then finish them here in Boudha.\(^{229}\)

In addition to the fake kangling, the shop also sells other instruments like the bell, dorje, and damaru. I was told that many tourists come in to buy the fake kangling, and most also end up buying other instruments as well. Not many Chöd practitioners buy them, however, as they want to have the real thing. The owner of this shop, Anonymous 1, told me that while most of their customers are tourists, there are also a large number of wholesalers from Tibet who come to buy them. They come relatively often and end up buying 25 to 50 fake kangling each time, which they then take back to Tibet and sell there. From what they were able to tell me, there is a relatively large market in Tibet for these fake kangling.\(^{230}\) Although they did not specify, perhaps this is due to tourism from regions in China outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region. It is also intriguing that the market for fake kangling would be so large, as I was told that it is easier to get real kangling in Tibet—although this may not be true.\(^{231}\)

I spoke to several other shopkeepers who were unable to help me, but was then told of another shop around Boudha that might be able to give me information. Upon reaching this store, I was hesitantly told that they could get me a kangling, but they would not give many details. The shopkeeper said that they would sell them, but not to strangers. Kangling are difficult to get in part because they are illegal to sell. This shop told me that they get them from a Lama through an intermediary. They offered to let me speak to the intermediary later in the day; however, when I returned and spoke to the intermediary they were unwilling to tell me anything.\(^{232}\) It seems likely that they did not want to tell a stranger—i.e. me—anything about the secretive and illicit trade of kangling. Even the Chöd practitioners I spoke with did not know much of anything about kangling outside of their ritual uses.

\(^{229}\) Anonymous 1 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
\(^{230}\) Anonymous 1 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author, November 7, 2016.
\(^{231}\) Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
\(^{232}\) Anonymous 2 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, November 7, 2016.
Images of the Kangling

A top-down view of two kangling used by a Chödpa

Some of the ornamentation hanging off of the kangling
The far end of the kangling where two holes have been drilled into the knee joint, which is supposed to be shaped like the Tibetan letter 'cha'.

The end of the kangling where the Chödpa blows into it, which is supposed to be shaped like the Tibetan letter 'ca.' The kangling on the left is capped with a metal mouthpiece.
Differences in Pedagogy

One of the most important things to realize about Chöd is that it is by no means an entirely uniform and unchanging entity. Different traditions and lineages differ from each other in various ways. Even within a single tradition, a specific teacher or practitioner might have slightly different beliefs or methods. Some parts of Chöd are more stable and universal in their application than others. The ethnomusicologist Jeffrey W. Cupchik outlines some of the key areas of variance, which are interesting to consider. He writes that the most stable part of the practice is the core meaning of Chöd, across “all Tibetan Buddhist traditions and lineages, gCod means ‘cutting off’ the mental habit of bdag ‘dzin ma rigs pa (self-grasping ignorance) to realize the mindful state of bdag med rtogs pa ’i shes rab (wisdom understanding selflessness).”233 As one moves away from this core practice they come to the ‘inner meditation’ practices, which are subject to a degree of variance between traditions; however, all traditions share the idea that the practice involves having an “attitude of renunciation conjoined with the altruistic intentionality of the Mahayana path and the insight of ‘emptiness,’ the realization of the truth of mutual interdependence (lack of self-existence) of all phenomena.”234 By far, the least stable parts of Chöd are the techniques and styles used in the music, which are shaped by the various teachers’ pedagogy and interpretations as well as the instruments themselves.235 These differences in how Chöd practitioners are taught the music of their practice is interesting to examine, particularly in those areas where strong statements from one tradition are held as unimportant in others. The differences that emerge between specific practices are also intriguing given the special bond that is held to exist between student and teacher—it is very important to honor your teacher and to fail to do so or to disrespect your teacher was described to me as grievous sin.236

Kalsang Tso and the Group Chöd Practice

Some Chöd practitioners such as Kalsang Tso were very willing to talk to me about the process they went through to learn the music involved with Chöd. She began her journey with a one-month class taught by Lopon Gyaltsen that had seven other students. At the time that she first began learning she had only gone through Lung, the second of the three steps you need to do before beginning to practice Chöd. Despite this, she was allowed to begin learning; however, they did focus more upon the physical sides of the practice such as singing and playing the instruments. During this learning process the first thing that she and her fellow students were taught was the melody. They were expected to learn the melody aurally and to memorize it; they never had any kind of musical notation off of which to read.237

After quickly learning the melodies, Kalsang Tso and the other students were taught how to use the instruments—namely the damaru and the bell. The process for learning the instruments was not entirely separated from that of learning the melody, as she and her fellow students were expected to sing the melody while learning how to use the instruments. They were never allowed to practice with only one instrument—they always had to use both the damaru and the bell and sing as well. There was not individual instruction on each instrument. In fact, there was not a

233 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 122.
234 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 123.
235 Cupchik, “Tibetan gCod Damaru—A Reprise,” 123.
236 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
237 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
long period of formal instructions on how to use the instruments at all. The Lopon from whom Kalsang Tso was learning gave some simple instructions on how to sit up straight and how to hold the instruments correctly and then expected the students to begin singing and playing. For the most part, the Lopon would allow her and the other students to begin playing without instructing them and then correct their mistakes after they had finished. Upon some occasions the Lopon would have some students demonstrate for the class and give them feedback on their performance. Through this method, Kalsang Tso was able to learn quite effectively.\textsuperscript{238}

During this one month of class, Kalsang Tso was not taught to use the kangling because, at least in her practice, one is not allowed to use the kangling until after receiving the Supreme Empowerment. She did later receive the Supreme Empowerment, which came with the added stipulation that those who receive it must practice Chöd at least once a month. Her opportunities to practice came in the form of group practices initially led by Lopon Gyaltser on the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 25\textsuperscript{th} of each month in the Tibetan calendar. In her tradition, these days are known as Guru Rinpoche day and Dākinī day respectively. The group practice is still ongoing, although it is now led by a chant master rather than the Lopon.\textsuperscript{239}

I was fortunate enough to get to sit in on part of one of these group practices, which took place on the 9\textsuperscript{th} of November. In addition to calling this a group practice, Kalsang Tso also referred to it as a Ganachakra or “Tantric Feast” (tsog kyi ‘khor lo).\textsuperscript{240} Attending this practice provided a helpful opportunity to see the continued process of learning and maintaining skills in the actual setting of active Chöd performance. At this particular practice there were probably around 70 people present, arranged in rows in a large room with many small tables and cushions that were all aligned towards the front of the room. Towards the front of the room, in front of a shrine, were massive piles of food that served as material offerings that would also factor into the various visualization that the practitioners would do. Most of these offerings seemed to be packaged snack food or fruit.\textsuperscript{241}

Both men and women were present, but it seemed like there were more women than men. Almost everyone present had the basic instruments used in Chöd—the damaru, bell, and dorje, although many did not have a kangling. About 20 people did have their own kangling with them. Everyone also had some form of the text off of which they would read. Most people had the long rectangular texts in Tibetan, but some also had wire-bound books with the Tibetan script, some sort of phonetic writing, and an English translation. One person even seemed to be reading the text off of their cellphone. Nearly everyone present appeared to be a local, or at least not a westerner, and everyone also seemed to be a practitioner. There was only one other westerner present besides myself, and he also appeared to be watching.\textsuperscript{242}

The practice began around 1:00 pm when the chant master entered, at which point everyone stood up and many people did prostrations. The chant master began to sing and play and everyone followed his example. People seemed to occasionally glance at the chant master, but most seemed relatively focused on their texts and seemed to know what to do without much guidance. The playing and chanting was almost hypnotic as a listener, perhaps it is a similar experience as a practitioner. Everyone had incredible posture and played uniformly with everyone else—they all turned their damaru the same way and hit the bell in the same direction. They were all in unison.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{238} Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
\textsuperscript{239} Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
\textsuperscript{240} Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
\textsuperscript{241} Group Chöd practice observed by the author, November 9, 2016.
\textsuperscript{242} Group Chöd practice observed by the author, November 9, 2016.
\end{footnotesize}
It was an awe inspiring sight. Amusingly, it seems that I was not the only one with that opinion, as a number of monks would walk into the room and record the performance or take some photos on their cellphones. I stayed at the practice for several hours but had to leave before it was completed. I was told that it lasted until about 7:00 pm for a total length of about six hours.

In addition to sitting in on the group practice attended by Kalsang Tso, I was also able to sit in on two classes taught by the Chant Master. These classes were arranged much like the group practice, with a number of small tables and cushions arranged in rows facing the front of the room where there was a slightly raised dais for the Chant Master to sit upon. At each of the two practices that I was able to attend there were perhaps around 16 people. There was a more even distribution between men and women, which changed slightly between the two classes as different people were in attendance. This was a much less formal kind of class than that which Kalsang Tso undertook, and it seemed to be open to the general public.243

These classes seemed to be aimed more at westerners than at locals or experienced Buddhist practitioners. The classes themselves were led by the Chant Master, but they were translated by a westerner who spoke English. The classes were even ‘advertised’ as being taught in English. At each of the classes I attended, around one half to two thirds of the class appeared to be a foreigner, mostly westerners. There were some people from in and around Nepal who introduced themselves to me, but they seemed to be in the minority. It is interesting to think about whether this changed the sort of teaching approach that the Chant Master took in leading the classes. Would he have taught differently if he had been leading a group of monks?244

The general format of each class was an hour long session, but the specifics changed from class to class. Unlike in Kalsang Tso’s experience, there was a lot of attention paid to the instruments individually. During the first class I attended, the Chant Master spent a good deal of time going over the particular things to watch out for when playing the damaru—being sure to keep your hand balanced, your body straight, the drum rotating smoothly, etc. He demonstrated this with an empty hand and then with the damaru by itself. Following this, he asked the class to attempt to make the correct motion either with an empty hand or with a damaru if they had one. He watched as people went through the motions and called upon several people to demonstrate individually, after which he gave some feedback and criticism. Following this demonstration, he then did a similar small lesson with the bell, before demonstrating both together and asking the class to attempt the motion with him.245

In terms of practice, much of it had to occur outside of the classroom, since this class met at most once a week. The Chant Master made it clear that it was ok to practice with just the damaru or just the bell and to take a break from one and work on the other if your hand got tired. He furthermore made no mention of chanting or singing when he was working with the instruments. This is a stark departure from the experience of Kalsang Tso, where she was required to use both instruments at once and sing while she played them. The students in the Chant Master’s class obviously had learned the melody for the chanting—seemingly before learning the instruments—

243 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
244 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
245 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016.
as they ended the first class by chanting and going through the text, trying to play the instruments as they had just learned. They were not, however, required to sing while practicing or discouraged from practicing with only one instrument.246

The second class I attended was similarly structured, with the difference being that the class began by chanting and reciting the text while attempting to play the instruments. It was followed by a small lesson on the damaru and bell, similar to what was done in the first class I attended. This class, as well as the first one, ended with a period of time for students to ask questions about the practice or the playing. Several students asked questions about the instruments and others asked about the specifics of the text. There was no real focus on the visualizations during these two classes. Perhaps this was because most of the students had not yet received an empowerment. It was announced, however, that a Rinpoché would be visiting the monastery soon who would be able to give them the empowerment that they needed to truly practice Chöd. Much like the initial lessons that Kalsang Tso took, these classes seemed to focus more on the initial physical activity involved in Chöd, albeit with different methods and rules.247

**Kalsang Ngodub**

Kalsang Ngodub’s experience learning Chöd came under the tutelage of Lama Tsering Wangdu Norbu Rinpoche, who used to be in Boudha. Kalsang Ngodub described Lama Wangdu as an expert and was happy to talk to me about his experience learning how to use the instruments. Unlike some of the others Chöd practitioners I spoke with, he received his Wang, Lung, and Ti from the Lama who taught him. Furthermore, he actually learned to play the instruments before learning the melodies. He briefly related how Lama Wangdu once told him that “without the instruments you cannot sing.” This led to the particular order in which he learned.248

During the learning process, he rarely received explicit direct instruction from the Lama—that was not how he taught. Rather, the Lama would teach by first demonstrating just a little bit with the instruments and then having the students try. He would then go around and correct mistakes. For the most part, the music was learned by watching and listening to the Lama; however, he did see musical notation for the kangling upon occasion. More rarely, Kalsang Ngodub said that there were sometimes small bits of instructions that were written down that could be followed for the instruments other than the kangling. Once he had learned the basic forms of playing the instruments, he was introduced to the various ways of playing them, which differs depending upon the specific meditation.249

**Anonymous 5**

Anonymous 5 was also willing to explain the process they went through to learn the instruments and melodies of Chöd practice. Before beginning to learn any of the music, they first received an empowerment from a Rinpoché and had the meaning of Chöd and its texts explained by a Lama—essentially going through the threefold process of Wang, Lung, and Ti. Following these three steps, they began to learn the music from the Chant Master who I was also able to speak

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246 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016.
247 Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, October 2016; Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, November 2016.
248 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
249 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
with. The first thing they were taught was the melody. This occurred before they learned to play the instruments. After they had learned how to chant the melody, they moved on, adding the instrumental practice.\textsuperscript{250}

The Chant Master’s technique for teaching the instruments involved demonstrating how to make the correct motions to play the instruments with an empty hand. He first demonstrated how to use the damaru by going through the motions and explaining the important parts of the practice such as which way to swing the damaru when you begin. He then proceeded to show the correct motion with which to play the bell, once again using an empty hand. Following this, he proceeded to demonstrate with the actual instruments. Once his demonstration was complete, he proceeded to have Anonymous 5 and the rest of the class split up into groups and practice—at first just using the instruments without singing. The Chant Master came around and corrected them when they were making mistakes. He also informed them that it was acceptable to practice with one instrument at a time, but that this should only be done for a short time—soon you should begin using both as well as singing.\textsuperscript{251}

Being able to hear of Anonymous 5’s experience learning from the Chant Master is interesting in that it reveals itself to be relatively similar to what I witnessed. The Chant Master still had them practice with an empty hand and then attempt to use one instrument at a time. He also, unlike some other teachers, did not make them sing and play at once or make them use both instruments. It is noteworthy that the way he taught non-westerners and westerners did not differ in any significant aspects. Perhaps this reveals that there is no compromising of standards or pedagogy, no matter who is learning.

\textit{Thoughts on Pedagogy}

It is interesting to see the differences in how various Chöd practitioners learned the music involved with their practice. It is intriguing to notice that some underwent the empowerment and the rest of the rituals needed to fully practice Chöd before they began learning, while others were allowed to learn how to chant the melodies and play the instruments before they were fully inducted into the practice itself. Another major difference that makes itself clear between different teachers and traditions is the order in which the various musical components get learned. For some, it was an absolute necessity that you know the melodies before you play the instruments, while for others it was the exact opposite. Beyond this binary difference, there were also intriguing differences of opinion about whether or not the melody needed to be sung while playing the instruments or if the instruments could be practiced individually or needed to be learned and played at once. If nothing else, these different experiences and various pedagogies make clear that Chöd is a complex and to a degree an individualized and evolving practice. The specifics vary from practitioner to practitioner, teacher to teacher, and tradition to tradition.

\textsuperscript{250} Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5, message to author, November 23, 2016.

\textsuperscript{251} Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016; Anonymous 5, message to author, November 23, 2016.
The Importance of Language

The words that people use to describe the world are often indicative of the way that they think. Someone’s choice of language can hold a wealth of meaning—meaning that can lie hidden in the implications of their word choice, perhaps hidden even from the person who said it. Word usage can reveal a matter of perspective; one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. Both of these words could describe the same activities, yet one is undoubtedly negative, while the other is assuredly positive. Noticing that someone chooses one word over the other enables you to gain some insight into their perspective. It is important to pay attention to the words that people use to describe their practices. The words people use to describe Chöd are therefore of the utmost importance for understanding how Chöd practitioners understand their own practice. Language is a reflection of how we think.

Readers should perhaps take this analysis of language with a grain of salt. First of all, none of the people I spoke with were native English speakers, which could color their word choice. Furthermore, changing words in Buddhist practice is to a large degree an impossible thing to do, for to change a word changes the meaning of the practice in a significant way. It is therefore “incorrect” to change words. These things being said, it is still interesting to see the words people use, particularly when they felt strongly about not using an alternative word. Maybe some of these phrases are not strictly correct, but the practitioners still felt strongly about them. This means that if nothing else the word choice is important in light of the ways that the various practitioners I spoke with think about their practice. Where it was given to me, I have also provided the Tibetan words to which the practitioners I spoke with were referring and thinking about, although they spoke English with me.

“To Cut” or “To Change”

As a practice, Chöd is described as a form of meditation wherein the practitioner tries to sever or cut attachment to the self. Chöd itself is said to mean “to cut” or “to sever.” Almost any book about Chöd would tell you this near the beginning if not on the first page or front cover. When I began my research I had no doubts about the link between ideas of “cutting” or “severing” and Chöd; however, as I began speaking to several Chödpas some of them told me their own ideas about the language. One man named Sonam Dorjee, who is an experienced Chöd practitioner, made the observation that in his opinion “cut” is a bad word to associate with Chöd and that maybe the word “change” is better. His line of reasoning was that Chöd is more complicated than simply severing attachment. In his words, attachment gets changed into the opposite of attachment during Chöd practice, it is not simply cut.

After hearing this opinion relatively early on during my research I made sure to pursue this line of thought with other Chöd practitioners, asking them what word they believed would best describe Chöd and then asking their opinions on the other options that had been presented to me. For instance, Kalsang Tso asserted that the purpose of Chöd is to cut away the self, but when queried about Sonam Dorjee’s opinion decided that she too thinks that “change” is a better word than “cut”. Her reason for agreeing stemmed from her understanding that “when something is

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252 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
253 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
254 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
bad you need to make it good”—which is more like “changing” than “cutting.”

In this statement, it seems like there is an implicit reflection of the basic idea of Vajrayāna practices—that you take something negative and turn it into something positive, that you transform it with the understanding that from one thing the opposite can arise, that you face your negative passions and transform them. Conceptualizing Chöd as “changing” rather than simply “cutting” is perhaps a reflection of these basic ideas of Vajrayāna or Tantric practices—learning how to experience the impure as pure. Maybe this basis for Vajrayāna practice is so instilled into the minds of some Chöd practitioners that it shapes how they think about and describe the practice itself.

While some felt that “change” was a better word than “cut” to describe Chöd, there were a number of Chöd practitioners who disagreed. For instance, Kalsang Ngodub, a Chöd practitioner who has been practicing for 15 years, was adamant that Chöd means “to cut.” He asserted that Chöd could not possibly be described as “to change” for the simple reason that if it was “to change” then the Tibetan word would not be Chöd (gcod). He presented further reasoning by saying that Chöd has been called Chöd and been held to mean “to cut” for centuries by the great masters of the practice—that is not something that we can simply change. Further expounding upon this line of reasoning, he described “cut” as a “good straight word” that will help avoid confusion.

In his opinion, this is important because you ought not to be careless with the Dharma or it can hurt future generations—if the words were changed now, then future generations who wanted to practice Chöd would not be receiving the same teachings as accurately and it could confuse and harm them. His belief that “cut” is a better word than “change” to describe Chöd seems to stem from a belief in the wisdom of the more accomplished adepts and an attachment to the importance of literal translation of the Tibetan words.

Kalsang Ngodub’s stance was mirrored in some ways by that of Anonymous 5. Much like Kalsang Ngodub, they also were quick to point out that Chöd is the practice of cutting away the self or the ego and that therefore “to cut” is a good phrase to describe Chöd. When asked for their opinion on the idea that “change” might be a better word than “cut,” Anonymous 5 described how change was not a good match for Chöd and pointed out that “change” can be either good or bad, you cannot tell from the word alone. In their view, Chöd is definitively about “cutting.” It is a practice meant to take a part out of you—you take away the ego and the negative parts of yourself during the meditation. They paralleled Kalsang Ngodub’s reasoning in saying that the Lamas they have spoken to all say “cut,” not change. It is intriguing to note that the close association of change with Tantric practice seems to be less prevalent in this view. As Anonymous 5 seemed to indicate, their conception of Chöd perhaps centers around removing the negatives of self and ego rather than transforming them, although perhaps they remove them via transformation—offering up the body in a feast to deities and spirits.
"To Perform" or "To Practice"

How is it that you would describe the action of undertaking Chöd? Would you say ‘I do Chöd?’ Would you say ‘I practice Chöd?’ Would you say ‘I perform Chöd?’ Each of these phrases would make sense to the listener, but each might imply something different. When we speak of ritual practice in English, the idea that you “perform” a ritual seems to be fairly common. If I were to describe someone currently engaged in Chöd, I believe the most natural thing for me to say would be something like ‘they are performing Chöd.’ In many instances, people like the ethnomusicologist Jeffrey Cupchik also use the word “perform” in association with Chöd. This perhaps is indicative of an implicit bias or fascination on the part of the writer with the musical or performative aspects of Chöd. Oftentimes it seems that the use of the word “perform” when discussing ritual practices hints that we think that there is something performative about the practices themselves. It is not just something you do, but is something that is—in some way—a performance. It is perhaps associated with music, dance, or some other performing art. Those writing about Chöd who are not interested in the music might use a different word such as “do” or “practice.” What is interesting is to see what words Chöd practitioners use to describe themselves undertaking the practice. This can help provide some insight into how they think about Chöd on a subconscious level.

Much like when asked about using “change” instead of “cut,” the Chöd practitioners I was able to speak with gave a variety of answers. For Kalsang Tso, the choice of word was fairly obvious. She indicated that she would most often say “perform Chöd” (geod stangs ba), and shied away from the phrase “do Chöd.” She thought that “do Chöd” was not a phrase she would use very often; however, she seemed thoughtful about using the phrase “practice Chöd.” After thinking about it, she asserted that she would probably say “perform” most commonly and noted that she thinks most other people use that word as well.

Anonymous 5 had a different opinion than Kalsang Tso. When they were asked about what word they would use to describe the process of Chöd meditation, they quickly said that they would say “practice Chöd” (geod nyams ling). They felt that the word “perform” did not fit as well. They made the interesting statement, however, that they felt that a more experienced Chödpa would be more likely to say “perform” rather than “practice.” On the other hand, a student would be more likely to say “practice,” not “perform.” Based upon their own observation, they seem to consider themselves more of a student than a fully independent practitioner. Given the fact that Anonymous 5 has only been doing Chöd for around two years, perhaps this makes sense.

This emerging binary between student and experienced practitioner is complicated slightly by the words of Kalsang Ngodub, who has been a Chöd practitioner for 15 years. Like

265 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
266 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
267 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
268 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
269 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
270 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
Anonymous 5, he too indicated that he would say “practicing Chöd,” an opinion that was further shared by Sonam Dorjee. Kalsang Ngodub thinks that “perform” is a poor choice of word. Interestingly, when I first mentioned the word “perform” and the Tibetan phrase gcod stangs ba that Kalsang Tso had mentioned, he blurted out something about singing and chanting—it made him think of the music involved in the practice. If nothing else, this indicates that word choice does indeed matter and has some implicit meaning, but it also clearly indicates that to him, the music is not the key aspect of Chöd. If it was, then given his association with the word “perform,” it seems likely that that is the word he would choose to use. Instead, he chooses to remain with the term “practice.” Interestingly, he was able to provide a reason for using this term—he said that “practice” is a good word because practicing is the most important part of Chöd. In saying so, he illustrates beyond a reasonable doubt that the choice of words used to describe one’s Chöd practice is indeed a way to peer into the thought process of the mind. Word choice is shaped by the way one conceptualizes the world around them.

Some of Ter Ellingson’s work provide another lens through which to view the word choice of “perform” or “practice.” In his dissertation, which examines the ritual music of Tibetan Buddhism more broadly, he writes that ritual music is more complicated than a mere production or performance of sound. Ritual music in Tibetan Buddhism, which could include the music in Chöd, includes the concept of music that is mentally produced but not physically present. The whole of the music, which is given as an offering (mchod pa), is more than the sum of its parts. The music is different from the sounds that are heard and is different in unique ways to each performer. The music, viewed as a musical offering, can be understood in terms of the body, voice, and mind—the physical, vocal, and mental dimensions. The instruments and performers’ bodies are the physical dimension, the sounds produced during the performance are the auditory part, and the meaning and mentally produced music are the mental part; it is these three parts put together that are the true “music” that is offered.

Given this way of conceptualizing music in the ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism, perhaps the use of the word “perform” is better than the word “practice.” I hesitate to assert that one word is correct or better than the other, particularly since some of the Chöd practitioners felt that “perform” was not a good word to use, but it seems that the implications of “perform” fit better with the idea that there is a mental component of the music. Ellingson writes that “every ritual performance includes instrumental music, since instruments and their sounds are always mentally projected, whether or not they are physically present.” If the music used in ritual practice has an important part of it that is purely mental, a part that allows the music itself to be considered greater than the sum total of its parts, then perhaps Chöd, as a practice that prominently features music, is more intertwined with the mental production of music than it might at first seem. If this is true, if the mental component of music is always present and ever important, then it is an indispensable and indivisible part of Chöd. The visualizations a Chöd practitioner does are the most important part of the practice, but perhaps the mental production of music is almost equally as important. The music cannot be dismissed. If this is the case, if the mental production of music

272 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
273 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
is always a key part of utilizing music in ritual practice, then the word “perform,” which implies the production of some type of performance—be it music, art, or dance, is the better word to use.

“Ego” or “Self” and Other Interesting Language

Another interesting choice of words occurred when people described Chöd as a process of severing the self. There were two words that often occurred here—some people said Chöd was a process of cutting out the “self,” while others said that it was a process of cutting out the “ego.” For instance, Sonam Dorjee repeatedly used the word “ego” when discussing his Chöd practice. As a way of illustrating his point he described the cutting out of the words “I,” “my,” and “mine” as key steps in cutting out the ego. He did not seem to mean this literally, but the meaning is clear. Those words which are possessive and indicative of the self are problematic. Anonymous also explicitly used the word “ego” most of the time, although they occasionally used the word “self” as well. Kalsang Ngodub used both “self” and “ego” almost interchangeably and echoed Sonam Dorjee when he said that “ego is the existence of ‘I.’” He went further and spoke on the issues of pride as well. On the other hand, Kalsang Tso seemed to most often use the word self.

To a degree these two words, “ego” and “self,” can be used to mean the same thing; however, it is interesting to observe that the word “ego” often has connotations of pride around it and is less encompassing than the “self.” Along these lines, it is worth pointing out that Kalsang Ngodub explicitly called out pride as a specific issue to watch out for. The majority of Chöd practitioners that I spoke with used the word “ego” more often than the word “self.” This might indicate that there is some preference for characterizing the self and attachment to the self that is cut out as “ego” rather than just as “self.” Ego, which has negative connotations, is better suited to the conceptualization of the practice as cutting out a problematic and negative attachment to the self.

This idea of problematic attachment to the self, tying hand in hand with pride, is worth considering in the context of a statement made by Kalsang Ngodub. When asked if he would call himself a Ngakpa, a type of Tantric practitioner, or a Chödpa, he responded by saying neither—he would call himself a ‘beggar.’ In his opinion, he is not advanced enough, not realized enough, to merit the term Chödpa. I noticed during other interviews, that some others shied away from identifying themselves as Chödpas as well. They were far more likely to identify themselves as students than as Chödpas. There is a sort of humbleness present that I suppose is understandable, given the aim of Chöd to allow one to sever attachment to the self or ego. The use of the more ‘negative’ term of “ego” perhaps makes sense as a way to implicitly identify that which is being cut away through Chöd as a problematic form of attachment.

280 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
281 Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, November 2016.
282 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
283 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
284 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
285 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
286 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
287 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
Music and Emotion

The ethnomusicologist Jeffrey Cupchik spent some time learning and investigating Chöd, arriving at the conclusion that the melodies and rhythms found in the practice “enhance the meditation process by eliciting specific emotions that aid the ritual practitioner in experiencing transformative insights into a given section of a Chöd ritual.” He goes on to write that it is the music in Chöd that functions as the primary method through which the Chöd practitioner attains a specific emotional state. This purposeful emotional state is key in that it accompanies the visualizations used during Chöd and can help lead to meditative insights. Cupchik continues this line of thought structurally by likening Chöd to a Catholic Mass. He puts forth the idea that Chöd can be examined as a sort of liturgical ritual that is formally divided into sections, each of which has a musically appropriate setting for the liturgical text. The melodies sung in Chöd are said to purposefully stress key words and syllables and function as part of an “emotional arc” that underpins the narrative and purpose of various sections of the ritual.

To put his claim more simply, Cupchik argues that the music is more complex than a simple melody accompanying a meditative practice; it is uniquely suited to the ritual. In his view, the music is specifically tailored to each section of a Chöd ritual in order to make the practitioner feel whatever emotion is most conducive to the practice—each melody evokes a mood that is appropriate to the meditation. The music goes even further than simply creating specific emotions by serving to reinforce the attachment to the self in order that the practitioner may be aware of it and sever it more completely. For instance, Cupchik asserts that the strange echoes and eerie sounds that reverberate through the air when a practitioner sings help elicit feelings of exposure and insecurity, much as the choice of a ‘frightful place’ (nyen sa) to perform the meditation does. Feelings of insecurity make people seek to protect themselves. In Chöd, this reaction to insecurity allows the self to be drawn forth and the practitioner made aware of it, perhaps in order that they may attempt to sever attachment to it.

Cupchik’s argument is compelling and makes sense, particularly when he points out the how the technique of tone painting—where musical gestures conjure up images in the mind of the listener—is used in the music of Chöd. His central point in this regard boils down to the idea that music of Chöd makes the practitioners enter an emotional state that is conducive to the goals of the meditation practice. Others have argued similarly, making the assertion that the melody played on instruments like the kangling during Chöd are an “acoustic expression of the emotional character of its generating mantra”—hinting that the music reflects the emotion of the words that are chanted or sung. The question remains, however, of whether or not the Chöd practitioners themselves feel that the music is key to the practice in this sense. Do they feel that the music helps to shape their emotional makeup during Chöd? Do they believe that it is a key accompaniment to the visualizations or is it something that the practice could do without?

288 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 32.
289 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 32.
290 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 32.
293 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 36.
294 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 45.
295 Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art,” 45.
Speaking with various Chöd practitioners about their thoughts on the music and its link with emotion elicited a variety of responses. One of the most interesting ideas to emerge was a sort of distinction between beginning practitioners or those initially drawn to the practice and more experienced Chödpas. What was even more certain, however, was that there was no clear yes or no response to whether or not the music is important as a tool to stir the emotions of the practitioner. This is a gray area.

One practitioner related how they were drawn to Chöd by the melodies, which they described as a “beautiful practice.”297 This practitioner, Anonymous 5, has been practicing Chöd for about two years and was careful to caution me that they were not the most knowledgeable about the intricacies of the practice. In their opinion, the music has a great deal of effect upon them during the practice. In addition to initially being drawn to Chöd by the music, Anonymous 5 said that they still feel emotions when performing Chöd. After a moment of contemplation, they added that the emotions are more from the music than from the visualizations that are described in the text. That being said, Anonymous 5 went on to say that they believe that the emotion of the music, particularly the melody, matches the emotion of the text. After hearing their opinion, I described some of the ideas put forth by Cupchik, and they agreed with what he had to say.298

Kalsang Tso, another Chöd practitioner who has been practicing for about three years, also described how it was the music that first attracted her to the practice of Chöd, saying that it caught her ear and was beautiful.299 There are a few melodies in particular that she feels are particularly beautiful. When asked if the music makes her feel some type of way during the performance of Chöd, she described how some melodies—particularly those that she finds extraordinarily beautiful—make her happy and how sometimes the music makes her feel sad. Some of the slower melodies even make her sleepy, but on the plus side they give her more time to visualize, which is good. The music found in Chöd can make her feel certain emotions, but she believes that the feelings she gets from the music are separate from the ritual practice; however, emotions are not entirely separate from Chöd.300

Kalsang Tso went on to describe how the feelings she gets during the performance of Chöd depend more on the words in the melody than on the music itself. For instance, when she sings of the suffering of sentient beings in samsara she feels sad. In her opinion, the music is an important part of Chöd, but it is important because it is a traditional part of the practice and because of where it comes from—not because of how it makes you feel. It is important because it came from dākinis and Rinpoches and has always been a part of the method of meditation. Contemplating her own practice, she made the observation that she thinks “you should feel it” when you do Chöd—perhaps feeling purposeful or peaceful. You should not feel nothing, but the feelings, at least the important ones, do not come from the music. In Kalsang Tso’s opinion, when you learn Chöd you eventually get used to the music and it is no longer distracting—you end up focusing on the words and not the melody or musicality of it all. While the music can instill emotion, this emotion is not a key part of the practice.301

One practitioner, Kalsang Ngodub, who has been practicing Chöd for 15 years, had yet another opinion on the relationship between music and emotion in the practice of Chöd.302 In some

297 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
298 Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
299 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
300 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
301 Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, November 2016.
302 Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.
ways, his opinions mirror those of Kalsang Tso. For instance, he described how in his experience people who are not practitioners and are just seeing others practice Chöd often feel emotions in response to the music. People who are just beginning to learn to perform Chöd often feel some emotions as well when they play the music, but eventually there should be no feelings—it should just be about the meditation. Kalsang Ngodub went on to describe how although when you first start practicing and learning you have emotions, you learn to cut them as you sever the self. According to him, once you have experience there should be no emotions during Chöd.\(^{303}\)

It is interesting to notice the spectrum of opinions that emerged among the Chöd practitioners with whom I spoke. Among those who discussed this issue with me, only one seemed to agree wholeheartedly with Cupchik’s characterization of the music in Chöd. The others were more circumspect in their linking of emotion and music as key facets of the practice—if they did not deny it outright. There is an interesting correlation that appears between how long somebody has been practicing and how they think about emotions and the music. In this admittedly small group of people, the person who had been doing Chöd for the shortest period of time felt that the emotions caused by the music were the most important to the practice. Those who had practiced longer either still felt emotions from the music but believed they were not linked to the practice in a meaningful way or felt that emotions—from music or otherwise—had no place in Chöd at all. This does not mean the Cupchik is wrong, but it may mean that the practitioners do not think about the music in Chöd the way that he does. Perhaps the music still is an important method of making practitioners of Chöd enter a certain emotional state at particular times, but it may be something of which they are not conscious.

In contrast to what Cupchik presents, some Tibetan Buddhist monks have even expressed concern about music’s ability to stir the emotion. Rakra Tethong, a former Gelugpa monk who resigned from the monkhood after fleeing Tibet to help lead a group home for Tibetan children had some interesting thoughts on the matter.\(^{304}\) He observes that in Tantric rituals, a category in which Chöd could be placed, music and dance are very important.\(^{305}\) The players and dancers must show the nature of the deities in the ritual and be aware that the music is meant as an offering (mchod pa)—“an offering of the best that we have.”\(^{306}\)

It is important to note, however, that Rakra Tethong expresses concern that is reminiscent of Saint Augustine’s concerns about music in his Confessions, a concern that the beauty of music can be distracting and detrimental. He says:

> “Of course, there can be real difficulties. For instance, if someone knows how to play very well on a stringed instrument, it sounds so sweet, so very sweet. And, if someone is trying to study or meditate, then—well, you know. Probably this is why stringed instruments aren’t played in monasteries. And this is why even the Indian Buddhist Vinaya (monastic discipline) texts put restrictions on music, and don’t allow monks to perform folk dances or folk songs. Still, it’s funny that in some parts of Tibet, in some small monasteries, the monks were the best dancers and players of folk songs.”\(^{307}\)

While this is focused mainly stringed instruments, which have no part in Buddhist ritual music in general and Chöd in particular, perhaps it betrays a more general uncertainty over the potential for

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\(^{303}\) Kalsang Ngodub in discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.

\(^{304}\) Rakra Tethong, “Conversations on Tibetan Musical Traditions,” 22.

\(^{305}\) Rakra Tethong, “Conversations on Tibetan Musical Traditions,” 10.


music to be a distraction. Rakra Tethong, for instance, explicitly mentions that the sweet music of a stringed instrument could have an impact on someone’s ability to meditate. It does not seem outside the realm of possibility then that the music in Chöd could potentially have a similarly deleterious effect upon the focus of the meditation. Perhaps this is why, as Kalsang Ngodub said, experienced Chödpas no longer feel emotions from the music. They manage to cut off the potential distraction while still using the music in the traditional role that it plays in Chöd. Perhaps these alternate perspectives ought to temper the interpretation that Cupchik makes of the role of music in Chöd. It is entirely possible that he is correct and the music in Chöd shapes the emotional makeup of the Chödpa during the practice, but it seems important to note that some Chödpas and others involved in Tibetan Buddhist ritual music likely do not conceptualize of the music in that way.
Conclusion

The music of Chöd is not the central part of the practice, but is perhaps central to the practice nonetheless. To examine any part of Chöd, but particularly the music, is to become aware of the tug of various sources of ideas. Resting above it all are the main teachings of Chöd, descending from people like Machik Labdrön, which in many ways transcend tradition and lineage—the conception of Chöd as an act of compassion and an act of severing attachment to the self is key and shared by all who practice it. At the same time, the multitude of various lineages and traditions make clear the extent to which the particulars of the practice vary. This was particularly clear to me in what various people told me about the music.

It would in many ways be easier if you could point to a damaru, ask what it means, and have every Chöd practitioner tell you the same thing; however, the symbolism and specifics resting around the music of Chöd vary from tradition to tradition if not from practitioner to practitioner. The various instruments used in Chöd certainly mean something, but what exactly that meaning is differs for practically every Chödpas. The specific symbolic interpretations, the specific method of playing the instrument, the various melodies that are sung—all of these things can be conceived of as both ancient, passed down from teacher to student, and relatively new, arising in the minds of practitioners during meditation. It is important to get a sense not only of Chöd as a whole, but also of the practitioners that are involved. The different ways that they conceptualize and think about the practice, the ways it makes them feel, the language they use to talk about it, and the meanings they attach to different portions of the practice shapes their experience and the way Chöd continues to function and evolve.

Almost everyone shares some basic conception of the practice itself and what the instruments stand to represent, but it can differ depending upon the specific message that they want to convey. Chöd is by no means an unchanging and uniform monolith. There are various ways that music is played and used, different ways that the music is conceptualized and understood. The ways that people learn are different. The language that people use is different. The ways that they think about Chöd and the ways that they talk about it are different. While Chöd is a practice where tradition is cherished and zealously followed, it is also a practice where the individual and the individual’s conceptions, in his or her quest to cut away the self, are key.
Appendix A: Glossary of Tibetan Terms
Listed in order of appearance

gcod—Chöd

ma geig labs sgron—Machik Labdrön

dril bu—the bell used in Chöd

da ma ru—the hourglass-shaped drum used in Chöd

rkang gling—the kangling, the human thighbone trumpet used in Chöd

dbangs—Wang, the empowerment one receives before being able to practice Chöd

lung—Lung, the reading of various texts that occurs before one is able to practice Chöd

khrid—Ti, the explanation of various texts that occurs before one is able to practice Chöd

dbangs chen—the Supreme Empowerment, one type of empowerment

blo dpon—Lopon, a monk who presides over tantric rituals

thod phur—kapala, a cup made from the top portion of a skull

dug gsum—the three poisons in Buddhism: ignorance, attachment, and aversion

bdud ’joms gter gsar—Dudjom Tersar, a type of Chöd practiced by Kalsang Tso

khros ma nga mo—Throma Nagmo, a protector dākinī referred to as ‘the Wrathful Dākinī’ or the ‘Black Wrathful Lady’

mkha’ ‘gro’i gda rgyangs—The Laughter of the Dākinīs, a type of Chöd practiced by Sonam Dorjee

‘jigs med gling pa—Jigme Lingpa, a yogi who revealed a “treasure” from Guru Rinpoche that led to the spreading of the Laughter of the Dākinīs

shi gcod—a type of Chöd lineage associated with Pa Dampa Sangyé

gcod nyo rdar ma seng ge—the type of Chöd practiced by Kalsang Ngodub

dbu mdzad—Chant Master

tsogs las ring chen phring ba—Tso Lay Rinchen Trinwan, a type of Chöd practiced by the Chant Master
mchog gling gter gsar—Chokling Tersar, a type of Chöd practiced by the Chant Master

rol mo—a variety of cymbal used by the Chant Master to lead performances

gtser gsar lus sbyin gcod—Tersar Lujin Chöd, a type of Chöd practiced by Anonymous 5

tshogs las rin po che ’i phreng ba—Jewel Garland of the Chöd Liturgy, a longer Chöd practice that takes almost a whole day

brdung ba—a category of instruments that are ‘beaten’

‘khrol ba—a category of instruments that are ‘rung’

‘bud pa—a category of instruments that are ‘blown’

rgyud can—a category of instruments that are ‘stringed’

rdo rje—the dorje or vajra, an implement and instrument used in rituals

da chen—the ‘big damaru’

da chung—the ‘small damaru’

thod rnga—a special damaru made out of two human skulls

grangs—‘counts,’ a way of conceptualizing single beats played on the damaru

rgya dril—a specific type of dril bu from China

rgya chu thig ma—a specific type of dril bu from China

dgi sha rkang ma—a specific type of dril bu from the principality of Derge in Kham in eastern Tibet

chos rgyal dril bu—a specific type of dril bu from the principality of Derge in Kham in eastern Tibet

myang dril—a specific type of dril bu from India

theg chon dril bu—a specific type of dril bu from Tibet

rgyud sde ‘og m’i dril bu—a specific type of dril bu from Tibet

rgyud sde gong m’i dril bu—a specific type of dril bu from Tibet

rlung dril—a specific type of dril bu from Tibet
gzhal med khang—a ‘heavenly realm’ sometimes referred to as “The Inconceivable Castle”

zangs rkang—a substitute for the kangling often made out of copper with an end shaped like a crocodile mouth

ra rkang—a substitute for the kangling often made out of rhinoceros horn

shing rkang—a substitute for the kangling made out of wood

tshogs rkang—a substitute for the kangling that is similar to the zangs rkang, but has a larger end

byan chub sms rkang—a kangling made from the bone of a Bodhisattva

bam rkang—a kangling made from the bone of a woman who died when she was pregnant

gri rkang—a kangling associated with two warriors who died in battle

cha—a Tibetan letter: ཇ

c—a Tibetan letter: ཁ

dbyangs—a type of melody used in Tibetan Buddhist music that is subtle and highly effective

bdag ’dzin ma rigs pa—self-grasping ignorance

bdag med rtogs pa’i shes rab—wisdom understanding selflessness

tsog kyi ’khor lo—a “Tantric Feast”

gcod stangs ba—‘to perform Chöd’

gcod nyams ling—‘to practice Chöd’

mchod pa—an offering
Appendix B: Rhythmic Patterns

Image A: Some rhythmic patterns played on the Damaru during Chöd, recorded by Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 55.
Playing Style of Kong-ling (Mindroling Tradition)

A bone trumpet, be it a Kong-ling or a Tsang-kong, is blown from the left corner of the mouth. A beginner produces vibration by slightly shaking his right hand. Later he must be able to vibrate by means of breathing only.

Playing Kong-ling one has to silently think these four sacred syllables, and slightly accentuate the sound according to the following rhythmic patterns:

**Sum-oo** ('Three blows')

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st blow</th>
<th>2nd blow</th>
<th>3rd blow</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Diagram" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Shi-oo** ('Four blows')

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st blow</th>
<th>2nd blow</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Diagram" /></td>
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**Chig-oo** ('One blow')

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<th>1st blow</th>
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**Image B:** Some rhythmic patterns played on the Kangling during Chöd, recorded by Scheidegger, Tibetan Ritual Music, 26.
Appendix C: Methodology

My research was accomplished through a mix of reading numerous textual sources, conducting interviews, participant observation, and simple observation. I spent the majority of my time doing fieldwork conducting interviews with various Chöd practitioners and shopkeepers in and around Boudha. I also spent a good deal of time reading articles and books written by various ethnomusicologists, as well as various teachings and historical sources. When I met with the Chöd practitioners, I had a small body of questions that I was prepared to ask based upon some textual research that I had already begun, but once I asked these questions I let the information that the practitioners gave me lead me down new paths. During subsequent meetings, when they were possible, I asked additional questions that had occurred to me and clarified information that I had already received.

I was fortunate to be able to sit in on the classes taught by the Chant Master and follow along with his instructions, albeit without the actual instruments. This helped to give me an appreciation for the amount of effort involved in learning how to do just the physical part of Chöd, let alone the visualizations. I was also incredibly fortunate to get to observe a group Chöd practice that I was brought to, as well as some Chöd that occurred around Boudha Stupa. My research coincided with the completion of repairs to the Stupa from the earthquake that occurred in 2015. Due to this fortunate alignment, I was able to witness several large group Chöd performances on the stupa itself, coinciding with the ceremonies that marked the completion of repairs to Boudha Stupa.

I unfortunately did not and have not received an empowerment or other initiations into Chöd, so I was unable to practice it myself and truly learn through doing the practice; however, with the exception of some secret things, the Chöd practitioners I spoke with were happy to share their experiences and offer me their help. They showed me their resources, texts, instruments, and other items used during their practice. They showed me where people make some of these instruments as well. They gave me much more of their time than I would have expected. My discussions and interactions with the Chöd practitioners along with my own reading and observations, made up the bulk of my research.
Appendix D: Project Advisor

Hubert Decleer received a B.A. in history and European literature from the Regent School in Ghent, Belgium, and a M.A. in oriental philosophy and history from the University of Louvain. Following this, he studied classical Tibetan and Buddhist studies under various tutors in Kathmandu, Nepal. He is a well-known researcher and thought of fondly by many. In addition to his own research, a book of research on Tibetan and Newar Studies entitled *Himalayan Passages* has been published in his honor. Outside of his research, Hubert founded the Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples SIT program in 1987. Since then he has often served as its Academic Director, guiding it through nearly 30 years of success. He is currently the Academic Director for the program.
Appendix E: Suggestions for Future Research

There is plenty that could still be done to do further research on Chöd and its music in particular. My research ended up focusing more on the instrumental side of the music, but there is much that could be learned about the chanting and singing that is involved in Chöd. Future researchers could possibly conduct fruitful research by recording and transcribing some of the melodies and then examining them for further evidence of tone painting and other musical techniques, as Jeffrey Cupchik has done. If someone wished to continue focusing on the instruments, there are several questions that I was unable to focus on. It would be interesting to see if the instruments used in Chöd are used in other ritual practices, and if so, how does their usage compare to their usage in Chöd. Furthermore, one could examine further how music in Chöd falls into the binary of music for Fierce and Peaceful deities, or perhaps the history of the various melodies used in Chöd.

It could also be useful to zoom in further and be even more specific than I was. Perhaps examining one particular lineage or tradition of Chöd or one particular practitioner might lead to some intriguing questions or information. Really focusing on the pedagogy and specific experiences of one teacher or practitioner would be quite interesting and allow one to learn more about the specific practices than I was able to do. I would, in fact, recommend choosing one lineage or tradition, as dealing with the various histories of the different traditions is confusing and requires more information than I could gather while still focusing on other research questions. By focusing on one tradition, perhaps one might be able to become practitioner as well, not simply an observer. There is plenty that could be examined further with Chöd, both with and without the music in particular in mind.

Kalsang Tso and I in front of Boudha Stupa where a group Chöd practice was about to take place.
Appendix F: Interview Information
The following are some brief details about the interviews I conducted and observation opportunities I had during my research period.

Kalsang Tso is a Chöd practitioner who spoke with me a great deal and helped translate for me when I needed assistance. We had meetings on 11/4/16, 11/6/16, 11/14/16, and 11/24/16. She also took me to a group Chöd practice on 11/9/16.

Sonam Dorjee is a Chöd practitioner who met with me on several occasions and was very helpful. We had meetings on 11/5/16 and 11/17/16 as well as a brief conversation on 11/24/16.

The Chant Master is a chant master at a local monastery as well as a Chöd practitioner. I was able to attend Chöd classes taught by him in October and November as well as meet with him and speak to him with the help of Kalsang Tso on 11/8/16.

Anonymous 1 is a shop keeper, who sells fake kangling, with whom I was able to speak on 11/7/16.

Anonymous 2 is a shop keeper, who secretly sells kangling, with whom I was able to speak with the help of Kalsang Tso on 11/7/16.

Anonymous 3 is a damaru maker with whom I was able to speak with the help of Kalsang Tso on 11/7/16.

Nata is a European student and employee at a local monastery, where they sell various ritual instruments for the monastery. I was able to speak with them on 11/7/16.

Anonymous 5 is a Chöd practitioner who learned from the Chant Master. I was able to speak with them on 11/8/16 and exchange some messages on 11/23/16.

Kalsang Ngodub is a Chöd practitioner with whom I was able to speak on 11/8/16.

Hubert Decler was my project advisor. I met and spoke with him on 11/23/16.
Bibliography

Text Based


Interview Based


Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, Boudha, Nepal, October 2016.

Kalsang Tso in discussion with the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 4, 6, 14, 24, 2016.
Sonam Dorjee in discussion with the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 5, 17, 24, 2016.

Chöd class (taught by the Chant Master) observed by the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 2016.

Anonymous 1 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 7, 2016.

Anonymous 2 (shop keeper) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, Boudha, Nepal, November 7, 2016.

Anonymous 3 (damaru maker) in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, Boudha, Nepal, November 7, 2016.

Nata (employee selling instruments at a monastery) in discussion with the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 7, 2016.

Chant Master in discussion with the author via translator Kalsang Tso, Boudha, Nepal, November 8, 2016.

Anonymous 5 in discussion with the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 8, 2016


Group Chöd practice observed by the author, Boudha, Nepal, November 9, 2016.

Hubert Decleer in discussion with the author, Kathmandu, Nepal, November 23, 2016.