

The Tibetan *Chöd* (*gCod*¹) Tradition: An Overview

The female Tibetan ascetic Machik Labdrön (Ma gcig Lab sgron, 1055-1153) developed the *Chöd* (Tib. *gCod*, “to cut”) tradition, a musical/meditation Vajrayāna method to cut-off the root of suffering, one’s egoic identification with the body or feeling “I” as the locus of the “self.” The rite involves a visualized practice of altruistic “self”-sacrifice that effects a radical transformation. This is brought about during a hauntingly beautiful drum-accompanied vocal performance of a Tibetan genre of experientially inspired and meditative ritual song-poetry.

During my fifteen years of research into *Chöd* rituals, while studying under a renowned practitioner, Ven. Pencho Rabgey, a Tibetan-Canadian elder and former monk of Sera Monastic University, I uncovered the design of the performative aspects of the *sādhana*² liturgies: patterns that connect the **outer** music and poetry performance and **inner** meditative visualizations. It appears that the *Chöd* masters have expertly designed the rhythm, melody, prosody, and phraseology (etc.) to produce the intended *rasa* for each subritual in the dramaturgical narrative of the ritual, deepening the practitioner’s meditation experience into each subritual section of the liturgy, and thereby bringing about the promised transformative capacity of the *sādhana* for the meditator.

These patterns became apparent after I spent time studying the tradition under the tutelage of recognized masters. My findings are based on a study with practitioners who carry both the rarefied musical performance tradition and secret oral instructions regarding the ritual practice. The study involved my immersion in a *guru-shishyā paramparā* relationship, the traditional Indian context of apprenticeship for musical-spiritual transmission that involves a sacred bond formed between teacher and disciple.

I initially studied the melodies and performance practices by rote. I resisted applying Western musical analysis techniques (thinking that transcribing the melodies into Western music’s modern staff notation, and thereby *textualizing* an heretofore *oral* tradition that had survived a thousand years without such help, was tantamount to heresy). After nine years, some ethnographic data – revelations from the oral tradition of practice instructions – led me to follow the advice of eminent Tibetan scholars and Lamas (with whom I’d consulted originally) and musically transcribe the melodies. In so doing, the subtle elements of construction underlying the ritual design ‘leapt off the page.’ Because I had been trained in Western musical analysis techniques, I immediately began to see relationships between the patterns of poetry, melody and rhythm and even harmonic implications. It seemed that the prosody and phraseology, directionality, pitch use, repetition involved the subtle or rich use of symbolic gestures.

This led me to conclude that there may be important benefits in first engaging in ethnographic immersion and subsequently conducting musical analysis in order to approach the subtle nuances and depth of spiritual-musical traditions generally. Furthermore, this may be particularly vital in the case of Tibetan Buddhist Tantric ritual for the reason that practitioners of these esoteric traditions often provide a written text of oral instructions for their disciples and

¹ The phoneticization of *gCod* as *Chöd* throughout is used to facilitate reading.

² *Sādhana* refers to a ritual practice’s liturgical text. The term literally means “method of accomplishment,” and denotes that by practicing a particular *sādhana* liturgy, or “method,” one can achieve enlightenment.

followers. Such writings are frequently meant to accompany a specific *sādhana* (liturgical ritual text). Likewise, this rich philological legacy of Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices written by the practitioners themselves is also accompanied by the oral tradition and carried as a living memory in the ritual performance repertoire of lamas. A Lama's ritual performance repertoire may be enriched by encounters with other texts and Lamas. Indeed, a repertoire of read and performed texts in an 'interpretive community' (after Stanley Fish) may also change as any Lama or practitioner draws from personal meditation experiences, and reads accounts of other practitioners in the same or related traditions in biographies, autobiographies and commentarial literature.

Tibetan Studies-focused anthropologists and ethnomusicologists will remember Ter Ellingson's seminal article on the damaru, *The Secret gCod damaru* published in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (1979). They may further recall that an important feature of the article concerned the individual insights of practitioners who might apply different meditation techniques and practices within a given ritual, or impute different symbolism to a given ritual implement – if it works to assist in the eschatological (soteriological) goals of the spiritual practice. I think of "ritual mapping" the layers of ritual performance (a weave of text, melody, visualization, gesture, and rhythm) what I call the "internal intertextuality" of a given *sādhana*, is a necessary window into this. In a sense, the inclusion of variation in ritual repertoire in Tibetan studies provides us knowledge of ritual change and innovation as a practitioner reaches greater depths of subtlety and appreciation for the practice.

My book on *Chöd*, produced at the interdisciplinary nexus of ritual studies, anthropology, ethnomusicology, Buddhism and Tibetan studies undoes the notion about meditation being a silent experience of stillness. That one's meditative journey through a musical performance can stimulate the entire body, challenging one's senses and feelings, while engaging in the altruistically motivated tasks of the bodhisattva, is indicative of the transformative aspects of the sensorium as being integral to the Vajrayāna Buddhist path.

The Tradition

Machik Labdrön had hundreds of thousands of disciples during her lifetime from across Tibet and throughout Central Asian regions, including Buriat, Nepal, and Mongolia. Machik passed on her tradition to her sons who, in turn, transmitted the spiritual teachings and musical practices through unbroken lineages of exponents. *Chöd* is now practiced in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. During the mid-twentieth century, the practice had been dying out, though there is now a quiet resurgence of interest because some Lamas are placing an emphasis on the importance and efficacy of this powerful method.

Philosophically, Machik Labdrön herself referred to *Chöd* practice as a combination of sutra and tantra, being, as it is, both based on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* ('Perfection of Wisdom') teachings and practiced as a *sādhana* in accordance with the class of *annutarā yoga* ('Highest Secret Yoga') *tantras*.

Historically, the tradition of performing ritual liturgies of meditative song-poetry was derived both from the Indian *dohā* tradition of Sanskrit meditative poetry and the indigenous Tibetan *mgur* ('songs of meditative experience') tradition. Thus, today *Chöd* is a *sādhana*-based oral-tradition with extant liturgical texts, written commentaries, a detailed oral tradition, and an aesthetically compelling performance tradition.

Socially, after receiving a *Chöd* initiation from a qualified Lama, one is thereafter permitted to receive instructions into the meditation practice and rituals. *Chöd* meditation practices are not restricted to ordained monastics; many lay people practice as well.

Chöd ritual practices are often performed in solo rather than ensemble contexts, and its practitioners are generally quite reclusive. Perhaps because of this, *Chöd* has received far less attention from Western scholars than the already much studied male-oriented, monastic-based, ensemble ritual music practices.

Culturally, Tibetans regard the *Chöd* practitioner's fearlessness as emblematic of a Machik's counterintuitive approach toward suffering. The most advanced practitioners are not afraid to visit with misfortune, or to face calamity head-on. Lacking attachment to their corporeal selves, they have no fear for their bodily safety. A *Chödpa* (Tib. lit. "Chöd practitioner") treats evil or kindness with equanimity -- at a fundamental level both mental states embodied and enacted by beings are equally deserving of compassion. In remote communities, Tibetans often call upon the *Chödpa* to fulfill social functions related with community healing and health -- such as attending to the seriously ill, or performing funerary functions such as carrying a corpse from the family home to the "sky-burial" site after certain ritual prayers are completed. *Chödpas* practice an elaborate version of *tong-len*: they visualize taking into themselves others' illnesses and suffering, while giving away to others all goodness they possess. Living beyond fear of being personally harmed, *Chöd* practitioners are said to not be vulnerable to contracting any illness or disease themselves though they may have had actual contact with the diseased.

Structurally, *Chöd* may be considered akin to the Catholic Mass in its dramaturgy. Each ritual liturgical text contains a set series of subrituals to be performed in a certain ordered sequence to completion. Each shorter subritual has an assigned melody, often with a *rasa* (Skt., Eng. "mood," or "taste") appropriate to that particular section of the liturgy within the overall arc of the ritual drama. Moreover, both rituals have a centrally climatic moment of "sacrifice."

Performatively, *Chöd* is simultaneously an **internally** performed "visualized" transformational meditation experience and an **externally** performed sacred musical liturgy.

Musically, *Chöd* involves the sacred Tibetan ritual instruments: the large two-sided damaru drum, the Tibetan bell, the thighbone trumpet, and the human voice. The melodies are said to embody the actual wisdom of the dakinis (female Buddhas), and carry symbolic "tone-painting" gestures that form what I call a "sonic iconography" for the visualized drama that is described in elaborate detail in the sacred poetry.

Ultimately, *Chöd* is an ascetic practice involving the greatest renunciation of all; the sacrifice of the "self" by cutting one's egoic "self"-identification with the body of this life. Although this altruistically motivated act is performed completely within the mind space of visualization -- where real internal transformation must ultimately take place -- it is said to produce benefits far beyond the sole practitioner.