

# Introduction

## Approaching Chöd Ritual Studies

*If the perfection of generosity  
were the alleviation of the world's poverty,  
Then since beings are still starving now  
In what manner did the previous Buddhas perfect it?*

*The perfection of generosity is said to be  
The thought to give all beings everything,  
Together with the fruit of such a thought;  
Hence it is simply a state of mind.<sup>1</sup>*

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*At the beginning, the Guide of the World encourages  
The giving of such things as food.  
Later, when accustomed to this,  
One may progressively start to give away even one's flesh.<sup>2</sup>*

—Śāntideva, 8th-century Buddhist Master,  
Nālandā Monastic University, India

This book maps the Tibetan Chöd Ritual Practice—its internally performed meditative visualizations and externally performed musical gestures—revealing the ways in which they are mutually interdependent, enacted in practice, and designed to cohere during the ritual process in order to create effective meditative experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this book, a transmission and translation of the Chöd ritual practice with ritual masters of the Chöd Tradition is recorded and analytically explored. A guiding question throughout this project was to identify the aspects of music that assist in the meditation practice and ritual process. There were four distinct stages to investigating this question: an initial extended period of apprenticeship in which the music, meditation techniques, and meaning were transmitted from teacher to disciple; a subsequent longer period of practice and performance with the Chöd lamas; an analytical period of music transcription and analysis; and finally, a series of ethnographic interviews which discussed the findings of the analysis.

A fifth stage was the writing of this book, which itself was an interpretive process. Yet, the question at the end of the project remained the same initial query and guiding force that continually energized my commitment to seek answers: What are the functions of music in the Chöd ritual meditation practice? Although the word “function” hearkens back to an earlier era of structural-functionalist scholarship, in this project looking for answers concerning musical functions was inspired by a great paradox. As important as it was during the pedagogical process to learn to perform the music of Chöd according to traditional expectations, the music was de-emphasized as a site of meaning in favor of the linguistic text of the liturgy. The linguistic text, too, was de-emphasized as a site of meaning—no matter how fascinating the poetic allusions, metaphors, alliterations, and how well-crafted the song-poems’ mnemonic devices appeared—in favor of the inculcation of a change in the heart-mind (Skt. *citta*) of the practitioner. The purpose of Chöd is not primarily to perform music. Yet, to the extent that music is the vehicle through which transformation occurs, its study within the context of tantric ritual meditation practice may be of value to students and scholars alike.

#### THE TIBETAN CHÖD RITUAL PRACTICE

Chöd is one of the most well-known Buddhist rituals across Central Asia. Chöd literally means “to cut” (*gCod*) in Tibetan. Machik Labdrön (Machig Lab sgron, 1055–1153), a Tibetan female ascetic, developed and then taught the Chöd ritual to hundreds of thousands of disciples during her lifetime. Machik Labdrön’s oral and textual instructions were disseminated extensively throughout the Central Asian Plateau and Himalayan regions to Mongolia, Nepal, India, Ladakh, Sikkim, Buryatia, and Bhutan. Several translators from these various regions would attend her public teachings,

along with thousands of disciples. Her Chöd ritual—a Vajrayāna (tantric) practice founded on *bodhicitta*, the altruistic motivation of Mahāyāna Buddhism—was continually tested and found to be one of the most efficacious means for rapidly attaining Buddhist enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

During several Chöd rituals, the practitioner goes to a solitary place and conducts an outward performance of playing the *damaru* drum and Tibetan bell, and singing prescribed beautiful melodies composed by Machik Labdrön and her best disciples, while simultaneously conducting an inner performance of powerful visualizations. Founded upon Buddhist notions of compassion and wisdom, consciousness and rebirth, the Chöd practitioner learns how to transform her experiences of suffering, as well as the suffering of others, into the path to enlightenment. The practitioner visualizes transforming her body into all things beneficial and desirable to others (such as medicines, food, clothes, wealth, etc.) and then giving these to others; at the same time, she visualizes taking into her own heart others' sufferings, sins, and negative karma. While the Chöd practitioner visualizes "cutting" and offering her body, she also "cuts" the way she habitually clings to the notion of "self" or "I." Thereby, she can realize the impermanent and contingent nature of the relationships between her mind, body, and "self." As Chöd is a highest yoga tantra (Skt. *anuttarayoga tantra*; Tib. *bla na med pa'i rgyud*)<sup>5</sup> practice, aspects of Machik Labdrön's teachings were taught only in secret, between teacher and disciple—an intimate bond with profound results and religious significance in terms of continuity of a lineage transmission and personal transformation through the practice. Some of the lineage practices were transmitted only orally, and teachers were forbidden to divulge some teachings except to certain disciples.

It is presently a critical historical moment in the history of the Tibetan Diaspora. Tibetan exiles with lived memory of Buddhist traditions inside pre-1959 Tibet are now sexa-, septua-, and octogenarians. While some of the nearly 7,000 monasteries destroyed in Tibet between the 1950s and 1970s have been rebuilt in exile (in India, Nepal, or in the West),<sup>6</sup> in the case of the Chöd ritual—which has traditionally been practiced outside monastic institutions—the process of lineage transmission has undergone significant challenges and transcultural transformations. Much responsibility lies at the juncture between Tibetan teachers and their Tibetan and non-Tibetan disciples.

Today, Tibetan elders who are themselves disciples in the Chöd lineages, now living outside Tibet in India and the West, have sought new

ways and means to transmit their knowledge and preserve the continuity and integrity of the Chöd Tradition and its lineages. I have been receiving a transmission of the Chöd lineage teachings through the normative traditional transmission process from recognized lineage holders since 1995. My main teacher of Chöd, Ven. Pencho Rabgey, whom I call “Pala,” is one of the last and eldest lineage holders in the Tibetan Ganden Chöd Tradition who retains a memory of how the tradition was practiced inside pre-1959 Tibet, and he selected me to learn in the close, one-to-one, *guru-śiṣya paramparā* (master-disciple relationship) context of musical and spiritual transmission.<sup>7</sup> This raises important questions about my own hybridic identity as a Western Buddhist and my insider-outsider status vis-à-vis the Buddhist tradition. As well, since I am inscribing my understandings and experience of Chöd within Western academic discourse, I am always implicated in the process of transcultural translation and its attendant responsibilities.

#### WAYS OF APPROACHING CHÖD RITUAL PRACTICE

Chöd practice has different functions on the individual and social level. On the individual level and setting, the practice can be used as a tool for achieving enlightenment. On the social level, Chöd rituals are often used to heal others and to prevent calamities and disease. Traditionally, the Chödpa (Chöd practitioner)<sup>8</sup> was requested to come out of their retreat place in the mountains down to the village to perform rituals that would remove disease and sickness from individuals and communities. At this point, it must be made clear that “suffering” within Buddhist epistemology is understood in terms of causality. That is, as the direct result of living in “cyclic existence” (Skt. *saṃsāra*, Tib. *'khor ba*), one is constantly driven by “the three poisons” (Tib. *dug gsum*)—“attachment,” “anger,” and their root, “ignorant self-grasping” mind—to act in negative ways through the doors of body, speech, or mind which could manifest as karmic illness or injury.<sup>9</sup> According to tradition, Chöd practitioners are not allowed to seek healing from doctors, but must utilize the practice to heal themselves, though it must always be performed with the compassionate motivation to improve one’s own condition in order to ultimately benefit others. The Chöd practitioner patiently accepts the results of bodily suffering from previous karmic causes—yet attempts to purify that karma. The Chöd practitioner experiencing physical illness can transform her own suffering into the path to Buddhist enlightenment by thinking compassionately that her illness is the suffering of others ripening

upon herself. The most advanced practitioner, if actually contracting an illness, would rejoice that her desire and efforts to relieve others of their suffering actually came to fruition.

Furthermore, if we were to theorize the Chöd ritual in terms of reciprocity in the healer-patient relationship, or perhaps in terms of “sacrifice,” our analysis would reveal a unique conceptualization of reciprocity in the exchange between the Chödpa and others. From the perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhism, when the Chödpa gives her body (mentally transformed into all things desirable) to others, she is not enacting the initial stage of the exchange; rather, she is repaying her debts to other beings. According to Buddhist conceptions of the continuity of consciousness and rebirth, we took rebirth countless times before this life, and for each of these lives we must have had a mother and father. By logical extrapolation, every being in the universe has been our mother and father countless times before. In each of our lives, our mother and father took care of us compassionately. While today most of us do not recognize our former mothers and fathers due to an absence in powers of clairvoyance, Mahāyāna Buddhists nevertheless endeavor to visualize others as such, and are therefore *always already* indebted to the kindness of all “mother sentient beings.” A component of the Chöd practice, then, is the paying off of our karmic debt to those whom we have harmed (knowingly or inadvertently) and to those from whom we have received kindness. From the tantric perspective, Machik’s Chöd Tradition is radical and could be dangerous. She not only pays off her karmic debt, she pays the most needy beings first. They are needy because of their marked malevolence and ill intentions from which *they*, the harmdoers (Tib. *gdug pa can*), will further suffer as a result of their negative karmic imprints. These needy beings are potentially the most harmful. Moreover, the site of practice is a major catalyst for rethinking the relationship of phenomena and beings to one’s “self.” It suggests exercising a constructive giving through imaginal self-destruction at the site of habitation of those dangerous and destructive beings. It is counterintuitive because at the moment the practitioner is most vulnerable and exposed to harm, and would normally seek self-protection, she gives the body away and then searches for the “self” that seeks protection. Finding none, she works toward cutting identification with, and attachment to, the body as the site of the “self.”

While Chöd has been mistakenly theorized as a shamanic rite, a sacrificial offering, and even a barbaric feast, I discuss the practice in terms closer to its Buddhist epistemological underpinnings. According to His Eminence Kyabje Zong Rinpoché (1905–1984), the renowned twentieth-century Chöd

practitioner and former head of the Ganden Chöd Tradition's lineage, Chöd is the practice of *bodhicitta*.<sup>10</sup> *Bodhicitta* is the altruistic mind devoted to the alleviation of suffering for all sentient beings—the compassionate mind that is a prerequisite to attaining buddhahood.



## Approaching Chöd from Buddhist Studies

Although the last three decades have seen a gradual increase in the amount of Western scholarship produced on Chöd, the ritual has captured the interest of Buddhist studies scholars more so than ethnomusicologists.<sup>11</sup> Scholars of Buddhist studies and Tibetology have been fascinated and loquacious in their enthusiastic entrance into the academic study of the Chöd ritual, and a number of Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism have produced works dealing exclusively with Chöd (Harding 2003; Edou 1996; Savvas 1990; Gyatso 1985).<sup>12</sup>

These philological explorations have examined aspects of Chöd from various perspectives, including: historiographical research on tradition and lineage (Sorensen 2013; Gyatso 1985); Chöd theory, doctrine, and *sādhana* translation (Orofino 2000; Savvas 1990); goals of the practice (Tucci 1980); hagiography (Harding 2003); and a combination of all of the above (Edou 1996). Taken together, these illuminate several aspects of the Chöd rite. Thus, a great deal is now known about the life and history of the Tibetan saint Machik Labdrön, such as the advent and dissemination of her tradition's lineages. Yet Western students and scholars of the Chöd Tradition are interested to know more about the significance of the Chöd ritual as a Tibetan tantric practice.

### TANTRIC STUDIES AND RITUAL THEORY

Studies of Tibetan tantric ritual have sometimes proceeded without locating the research within the larger discourse of ritual studies in ethnomusicology, anthropology, and religious studies, as was discussed at a conference on Tibetan tantric ritual.<sup>13</sup> After nearly two days of presentations, Donald Lopez concluded that dualistic categories of sacred/profane typically encountered in works authored by E. B. Tylor and Emile Durkheim were unknowingly woven into the narrative of the majority of papers. He argued that categorical differentiations were often unconsciously embedded in the work of scholars emerging from Western European approaches to the study of ritual. In particular, he suggested more critical probing into the ongoing and

problematic distinction in academic studies between that which constitutes a *bona fide religious practice* on the one hand, and a *folk belief* or *attitude* on the other. The legacy of this differentiation in the social sciences and humanities, with its history of attaching greater value to the importance of conducting studies in one subject area over another, needs to be more critically addressed in Tibetan ritual music studies.<sup>14</sup>

This is necessary because in the Tibetan context what scholars name “ritual” (Tib. *cho ga*) occupies a social and cognitive space in which religious belief and ritual practice are intertwined for Tibetan lay and ordained practitioners as well as for householders and itinerant nuns and monks, elders and youth, clerics and ascetics, females and males. Tantric ritual performances attract practitioners and participants from these social domains, building a bridge across the deep crevasse of what is considered relevant and superfluous in Durkheim’s categories. The dyadic categories of religion/magic or religious worship/superstition are doctrinally defined; but, in practice, blurring is evident in many Tibetan social contexts (which makes writing about Tibetan ritual practices a very delicate enterprise). Moreover, the categorical definitions of magic, belief, religion, and worship are not universally understood across all Tibetan social contexts. An additional confusion about worship has to do with the notion in Vajrayāna practice that buddhas are not solely external beings. The identity of individuals is shaped through the tantric practice of guru-deity yoga,<sup>15</sup> which is coextensive with the worship of deities.

Many Tibetans receive their name from a lama, not from their parents; and, from a lama they may also receive and recognize a personal *yidam*, or “meditational deity,” which functions literally as a “mind” (*yi*) “protector” (*dam*). The *yidam* is the meditational deity with whom a practitioner personally identifies and in whose form she or he seeks to become enlightened, recognizing that the deity is not an inherently existing form, but manifests as a consequence of the dependent arising of karmic causes and conditions.<sup>16</sup> This is a very different tack than deification and worship in the Abrahamic and other theistic based traditions in which a conventional subject (worshiper) is interminably separate from a theistic source (God). Early Western writers of Tibetological literature focusing on Tibetan Buddhist ritual sought to recognize the integrated practice of religious ritual and belief in daily life. They worked at building a vocabulary to describe the Buddhists’ worship of an omniscient being (buddha) who may also be coextensive with the practitioner. Tibetologists’ first approaches to research on ritual often, however, treated religious subject matter in the language of Orientalist superiority and exotica, and attended primarily to the clerical role of monks who occupy the office of monastery ritual performers.<sup>17</sup>

## ON TIBETAN LIFEWAYS

One barrier to a deeper understanding of Tibetan Buddhism may be overcome by recognizing the ways in which Tibetans are taught to listen to Buddhist teachings from a lama. From a doctrinal perspective, buddhas can teach other beings how to reach higher levels of knowledge on the path to omniscience so that they may know the causes and conditions that lead to suffering in order to stop themselves from creating the conditions for further suffering, and instead transcend “cyclic existence.” Thus, it is important to understand that, according to Buddha’s teachings, the onus is on the individual practitioner to put the teachings into practice.

At the same time that people worship the buddhas (by making offerings, confessions, etc.), many Western Buddhists become confused about basic points. If it is up to the individual to become enlightened, then why worship another being? In conversations between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, I have heard a great deal of confusion on this point. For example:

I thought Buddhists were atheists. If they are, then why do they place such strong emphasis on ritual worship and meditation practice? Do they believe in gods, or not? If they are *worshipping* buddhas, then the buddhas might as well be gods—they are just gods by another name. What are they praying for anyway?<sup>18</sup>

Tibetan lamas maintain that for many this confusion persists. The dividing line between those who understand the nature of buddhas and those who worship buddhas *as if they are gods* (believing that buddhas can *save* them from environmental calamities, minor misfortunes of thieves, and great misfortunes such as a rebirth in hell or as an animal) has primarily to do with education level.

Pala (Ven. Pencho Rabgey), born in the mid-1930’s in rural Tibet, recalled that while growing up, most of the lay population had very limited access to formal education, whereas becoming ordained as a monk or nun was the main route affording one that opportunity. This relates to early Western Tibetological writings, which conveyed a sense that, among lay practitioners (householders, farmers, nomads, and semi-nomads)—who gained some education by attending periodic traditional spiritual teachings given by lamas—many appeared to be worshipping buddhas in a manner that seemed theistic. However, the rituals of worship, in essence, express reverence for the realized human potential of the Buddha as well as the great accomplishments of highly realized lamas and practitioners. The key distinctive aspect rests in the ways in which Vajrayāna



practitioners engage in guru-deity yoga. After having received a tantric initiation from a qualified lama, thus being blessed and empowered, one can visualize oneself as a buddha deity—whether one is a nun, monk, or lay practitioner. Yet, among lay Tibetans, who comprise the majority of the community of worshippers, many tend to weave belief, superstition, faith, and practice in everyday life (as do educated people who consult astrological charts). Similarly, blurred lines are evident in the social reception of the Chödpa. For example, in some Tibetan Buddhist communities, Chöd practitioners live in hermitages in the forest or in caves. They are widely regarded as unconventional ascetics; and because Chöd practitioners train to develop non-attachment to their own body, typically they are the ones called upon to remove a deceased person's body from a family home and carry it to the funerary site. Some Tibetans exercise caution about the disease they feel they could contract merely by touching the Chödpa. Thus, a Chöd practitioner may engage in retreat, living apart from a community to take nightly meditation and train extensively in the practices, only to later be called upon to perform spiritual and social services.



## Approaching Chöd from Ethnomusicology

### ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND TIBETAN RITUAL MUSIC STUDIES

Without Tibetologist-ethnomusicologist Ter Ellingson's "road map" to the study of Tibetan ritual music, this exploration into the genre of the Chöd ritual meditation practice and the performance tradition would have been significantly hindered.<sup>19</sup> To assist the reader with expertise in *either* music or Buddhist ritual practices *but with* minimal knowledge in the other would require a treatise-length exposition which, thankfully, Ellingson (1979) has already undertaken.<sup>20</sup> Ellingson showed that a close ethnographic study and treatment of the music within the intimacy of ritual could reveal the intricacies of symbolic levels of Tibetan culture and Buddhist practice.

Historically speaking, however, the Chöd practice did not emerge within, or exclusive to, the performance genres of Tibetan ritual music that have already been studied: ensemble based monastic chant (Kaufmann 1978), monastic orchestral ensemble performance (Ellingson 1979; Canzio 1978), and ritual dance (Schrempf 2001; Calkowsky 1992; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975). From an historical perspective, such a view mistakenly overlooks the fact that the Chöd Tradition's melodious dharmic poetry is derived from the Tibetan *mgur* tradition ("songs of meditative realization"), which itself

may stem from the Indian *dohā* tradition of meditative poetry composed by mahāsiddhas; and, from a ritual perspective, Chöd is associated with ascetic meditation traditions due to the site and context of its intended practice.

Given the particular differences in the Chöd ritual music's historical origin and performance context, we may wonder to what extent Ellingson's "mandala" concept should be prioritized in analyses of Tibetan ritual music. Ellingson himself admits that the "mandala of sound" perspective is but one possible conceptual paradigm, and writes that indigenous Tibetan interpretations may be grounded in different viewpoints. Ellingson qualifies his focused attention on the "mandala" concept as follows:

Tibetan interpretations of music present several alternatives to the 'mandala' concept, which might equally well have been chosen for primary emphasis: the poetic quantitative 'ocean of melody' image, Atiśa's 'sensually pleasing offering,' and Sa skya Paṇḍita's 'for the benefit of others' concepts, to mention only a few. Generally, in both writing and speaking, Tibetans cite these concepts of music far more often than the 'mandala of sound' concept.<sup>21</sup>

Ellingson's treatise includes a survey of the various alternative perspectives to which a comprehensive description, analysis, or interpretation of a Tibetan ritual music tradition may be subject. He openly disavows singular representations as insufficient, finding them to be no more than footholds for explanatory theory. However, he takes the position of the "mandala" concept quite far and his doctoral thesis has remained arguably the most important treatise in the English language on Tibetan ritual music, correcting and advancing the work of earlier researchers Ivan Vandoor and Walter Kaufmann.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, the scholarship on Chöd has up until now focused on the written ritual text and visualizations, but minimally on the integrally related sounds, rhythms, vocalizations, gestures, and mantric utterances to name but a few performative aspects.

#### NATIVE/INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES

Since Chöd is a tantric ritual music tradition in which visualization of a *maṇḍala* is not the guiding concept for sound production or musical gesture in performance, my research necessarily involves an alternative focus to that of Ellingson's work. In this book I attempt, as much as possible, to illuminate normative conceptions within Chöd pedagogy, ritual meditation

practice, and ritual music performance. By doing so, I hope to provide a fuller understanding of the multifaceted nature of Tibetan tantric ritual.

There are certain culturally internal interpretations of Chöd practice and performance that a Tibetan Chöd lama (Skt. *guru*; Tib. *bla ma*) imparts to student practitioners for them to put into practice. Due to a cultural relativist perspective inherited from sociocultural anthropology, learning the “native-perspective” or “indigenous perspective” as much as possible is one of the main aims of ethnomusicologists. As one ethnomusicologist points out, “The notion of ‘native perspective’ is fundamental for most recent humanistic research in ethnomusicology.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, learning the indigenous perspective provided a basis for the ways in which I studied Chöd ritual meditation practices and attempt to explain my findings here.

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

My approach toward learning and explaining the Chöd ritual practice relied on the combined methodologies of participant-observation in cultural anthropology, and a musical apprenticeship in the *guru-siṣya paramparā* paradigm familiar to the Classical Hindustani and Carnatic forms of music transmission within Indian traditions (in which there is also often a spiritual transmission, as there is in the Chöd transmission process). In addition to these dialogic and performative methods, I also employed the research approach of Buddhist studies scholars,<sup>24</sup> working with my Chöd teachers in translating Chöd ritual texts while receiving commentary into their meaning.

My overall approach, much aligned with James Spradley (1979), yielded an important methodological insight about the value of seeking indigenous interpretations.<sup>25</sup> I attended to Tibetan interpretations of what is important about the music and its performance in the Chöd meditation tradition.<sup>26</sup> I also sought out advice from Tibetan scholars and lamas about what would be potentially useful to Tibetan scholars and practitioners following an immersive ethnomusicological study of Chöd. I was advised to (1) endeavor to receive as full a transmission as possible, and (2) to transcribe the music.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH ON CHÖD: CONTEXT OF STUDY

Currently, it is a crucially important moment in the Tibetan Chöd Tradition. With few leading exponents remaining who carry a living memory of practices as they were in Tibet, students face serious challenges to receiving the full explanation of the Chöd traditional practices. Despite the challenges, I have been fortunate to have studied with several Tibetan ritual masters in

the context of transmission of teacher to disciple within the Chöd Tradition, receiving an initiation and then studying chiefly two areas: the musical practices and meditation practices on a one-on-one basis.<sup>27</sup> My studies of these two areas are woven throughout this book. In particular, I was exceptionally fortunate to work most closely with Ven. Pencho Rabgey (hereafter also “Pala”<sup>28</sup>), a leading expert in the Chöd system, with whom I made initial word-for-word translations of Chöd liturgical texts (Skt. *sādhana*s). I received, in tandem with the translation, commentarial instructions into each aspect of the meditation practice and musical performance initially over the course of several months. I am grateful to have continued to translate and receive transmissions in the tradition for more than twenty years with Pala.

An ethnomusicological perspective on Buddhist ritual music can offer insights into at least three areas to a study on the Chöd ritual for both Buddhist Studies scholars and ethnomusicologists engaged in research on liturgical ritual practices.<sup>29</sup> First, an ethnomusicological perspective may be valued for the extent to which an intimate ethnographic context offers a “truly participatory participant-observation” experience that helps to bring the ethnographer closer to the “lived experience” of those who practice a ritual.<sup>30</sup> Second, the framework of learning an instrument (or several instruments as is the case with Chöd) offers insights through the pedagogical process to understand such important facets of a ritual as symbolism, ethical principles, and standards specific to the teacher(s) and by extension to those in the same sociocultural milieu. Lastly, as is often the case with ethnomusicological studies, a multisite ethnography allows one to reconstruct internal lines of connection between different masters' traditions across a global Diaspora, which in the Tibetan context is understood in terms of lineage. By participating in the study of Chöd in six different pedagogical contexts,<sup>31</sup> in several communities, in four countries, and over the course of several years, my study of this single tradition has helped me gain a clearer understanding of the transmission of oral tradition, the permissible variations in Chöd ritual music performance, and the challenges related to the continuity and change of ritual traditions.

#### EFFICACY OF CHÖD PRACTICE

Empirical claims about the efficacy of Chöd practice abound in the informal discourse among Tibetan ritual masters and their disciples. Efficacy here refers to the effectiveness of Chöd as a Buddhist tantric rite in comparison with other tantric rites. Thus, efficacy denotes the power and effectiveness

of a ritual as a basis for producing the result of changing one's perspective about the nature of "self" and reality. According to Chöd theory as well as practice, this involves testing out the effectiveness of the Chöd method for gradually reducing the mental attitude of "grasping" to one's "self" and phenomena as "self-existent," and moving toward what the tradition considers a more realistic conception of reality and one's own nature. The Chöd practitioner's goal is to work toward eliminating all latent mental clinging to the notion that there is any intrinsic reality, or inherent existence, to the "I" that is perceived to be located at the center of one's experience.

In discussing efficacy with respect to Chöd ritual performance elements, our concern is with the function of musically associated performance aspects—all physical and sonic gestures, including mantric utterances, which occur in the context of Chöd ritual performances—as in some way helping to bring about the desired results of the meditation practice. In this book, we investigate various ways in which aspects of music such as vocal performance (of melody as well as mantra) in the Chöd ritual practice function in the meditation process. To frame this study in terms of efficacy, we ask: "How does the musical performance assist with the meditation?" "How do the speech and bodily aspects of the ritual (the vocal/oral and physical performance aspects) help to enhance the mental visualization aspects?" "To what extent are certain sounds necessary (or peripheral) to the (proper/successful) execution of the ritual performance (within the particular context of the occasion of performance)?" Attending to these questions, we will attempt to gauge the contingencies of meaning *in situ*.

### *Ritual Studies: "Flow" and Efficacy*

Ritual theorist Catherine Bell notes that there has been significant debate among scholars as to which aspects of ritual are most efficacious. She juxtaposes two interpretations: on the one hand there are the physical, kinesthetic "sensations experienced by the body in movement"; and, on the other hand, there is the synesthetic "total, unified and overwhelming sensory experience."<sup>32</sup>

Most performance theorists imply that an effective or successful ritual performance is one in which a type of transformation is achieved. Some have described it as a transformation of being and consciousness achieved through an intensity of "flow."<sup>33</sup>

The concept of “flow” developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi<sup>34</sup> places emphasis on the efficacy of the kinesthetic aspect of performance. He attempts to illustrate a major goal of performance theory:

[To s]how that ritual does what it does by virtue of its dynamic, diachronic, and physical characteristics, in contrast to those interpretations that cast ritual performances as the secondary realization or acting out of synchronic structures, tradition or cognitive maps.<sup>35</sup>

Bell maintains that the kinesthetic aspects of rituals are those that “grasp more of the distinctive physical reality of ritual so easily overlooked by more intellectual approaches.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast, other scholars “have debated whether the efficacy of ritual performance resides in the transformation of the meanings of symbols [chapters 3, 4, and 5] or in the non-discursive, dramaturgical and rhetorical levels of performance [chapters 2, 6, and 8].”<sup>37</sup> The processual and dramaturgical aspects of the latter are what performance studies theorists point to as the emergent qualities of a ritual event.<sup>38</sup>

In this book, we explore both physical and intellectual aspects of ritual, the musical performance, and the simultaneously produced visualizations. I suggest a need to provide a model for how to “map” ritual in order to see where concordances might exist between the intellectual/cognitive and the bodily/somatic aspects of ritual performances in the tantric ritual context. This may be useful more generally beyond Buddhist Studies for those engaging in studies of ritual through the disciplines of ethnomusicology, performance studies, and cultural anthropology in different geographic regions. In chapters 1 through 5, we look at examples of how such “ritual mapping” may be used in ritual analyses.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, the study of ritual involves exploring questions about the significance of physical and sonic gestures as well as the symbolic and cognitive visualizations that occur during ritual performances. To approach such questions, one of the important methodological tools is the ethnomusicologist’s study of, and participation in, ritual music performances. Formally, the ethnographic method of inquiry in cultural anthropology does not necessitate incorporating participation and performance. In other words, according to the conventional understanding of what many anthropologist fieldwork-oriented researchers refer to as the participant-observation mode of ethnographic research, a less performative approach is the norm—but this is not so in ethnomusicology.

### “EMIC”-“ETIC” ETHIC

As an example, for the majority of cultural anthropologists, the ethnographer attempts to adopt the role of “participant-observer” in so far as it is culturally acceptable in a given community, setting, and occasion. The *participant* side of the ethnographer’s hyphenated identity is the “emic,” or cultural “insider’s” perspective, which is a highly negotiated status and may be gained in some cases by learning a trade, craft, or performance skill, as would a native student of the tradition. On the other side of the hyphen is the *observer* identity, the “etic” or “outsider’s” perspective. In this capacity, the ethnographer assumes a social and intellectual distance from the cultural context of the ritual despite their participatory involvement. Many ethnographers working in the discipline of cultural anthropology since the mid-1980s have maintained a reflexive dialogue about this methodology, periodically revisiting the issues, problems, and difficulties in attempting to maintain an “emic” and “etic” perspective at the same time while in the context of studying a ritual tradition.<sup>39</sup> More recently, several ethnomusicologists (Barz and Cooley et al. 1997) joined their voices in this chorus of questioning how this can be done.<sup>40</sup> The collection of articles in *Shadows in the Field* seem to suggest the question: How can one truly get “inside” a ritual performance if one is also somehow “outside” it and watching it all happen from a “bird’s-eye view” at the same time? Barz and Cooley note the uniqueness of the experiential aspects of the ethnomusicological approach as opposed to the often more theoretically charged investments of the cultural anthropologists.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, as Catherine Bell notes, eminent cultural anthropologist Victor Turner suggested late in his career that the ethnographic study of ritual “should be supplemented with performances of it, by the theorists themselves, in order for them to grasp its meanings. His suggestions were picked up by others who have interwoven the study and the practice of ritual in various ways.”<sup>42</sup>

#### *Level of Ritual Involvement: The Difference Participation Makes*

Indeed, it may be asked, “How is it possible for an ethnographer *who is not involved in performance* to understand the various symbolic referents cued by instruments, vocalizations, poetry, and movement in a ritual?” For example, by spending one year living in Vietnamese-American Buddhist Diaspora communities across the United States and Canada while volunteering as the

translator/coordinator and cultural broker for a delegation of Tibetan monks from Sera Monastic University, I observed the Tibetan abbot, an elder ritual master, engage daily in leading Tibetan tantric ritual performances. In this case, I saw how a skilled ritual officiant could alter a ritual performance due to contingencies such as: weather conditions, size and shape of venue, context of venue (home, temple, hospital, or another site), available materials for offering, participant knowledge of ritual protocols, participants' fear or excitement, and an officiant's ritual assistants' levels of skills and experience among other numerous aspects related to performance practice. By assisting and watching the abbot, translating the ritual *sādhana*s, and even observing the same translated *sādhana*s being enacted in ritual performances, I did not acquire a full understanding of how to perform all the rituals myself—though I gained a strong appreciation for the abbot's ritual knowledge and artistic skill. My understanding of the symbolic referents in the Chöd practice rituals exceeds my understanding of many other rituals because I have experienced learning to practice Chöd myself. That being said, my somewhat more “emic” perspective vis-à-vis Chöd ritual performances has been informed and strengthened by the relatively “etic” involvement I have had with the abbot's ritual performances.<sup>43</sup>

### *Combining “Emic” and “Etic” Approaches*

I argue that both “emic” and “etic” perspectives are not easily balanced, but my experience studying the Chöd Tradition for several years informs me that the “emic” perspective yields particular kinds of useful data, while an “etic” viewpoint provides other sorts of insights. To be sure, an ethnographer is by definition never completely “emic,” though there is a strand of ethnomusicological theory and practice that prescribes one strives toward achieving bi-musicality.<sup>44</sup>

This book indicates the ways in which three ethnomusicological methodologies respectively yield complementary “emic” and “etic” perspectives of a Tibetan tantric ritual: (a) studying the ritual through the traditional master-disciple context with different lamas and practitioners in the same lineage tradition and across traditions; (b) creating musical transcriptions of the melodies; and, (c) graphing characteristics of the ritual performance for analysis. I hope to show that bringing all these research methodologies together has an important value. The first-person accounts given by lama practitioners who have performed the ritual and gained insights through meditational experiences are certainly valuable as an “emic” perspective. As



well, since the students of the tradition who attempt these same techniques and paths of meditation may gain insight through practice experiences, their first-person accounts may also inform the tradition from an “insider” or “emic” standpoint.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, transcribing the Chöd melodies and “ritual mapping” all the performative aspects of the tradition (methodologies b and c, above), a largely “etic” endeavor, may refer back to and inform what the analyst has gleaned from an “emic” viewpoint. In a practical way, music analysis endows the ethnomusicologist with a deeper understanding of the relationship between the performative and linguistic aspects of the ritual and the associated visualizations. The results of musical analysis may also have a positive valence for practitioners who can observe the mechanics of ritual design underlying the practice.

Drawing upon Buddhist studies, I also employed a textual research methodology, developing a word-for-word translation of the Chöd sādhana’s liturgical poetry by receiving a close commentary on each section from a qualified ritual practitioner who has expert knowledge in that ritual. The commentary involved a deep process of oral transmission (Tib. *lung*) ensuring that the disciple understood the meaning of the practice. Thus, one aim of the translation/transmission process—to use the formal language of ethnography—was to *bring* the disciple/apprentice to the tradition, shifting from an “etic” perspective toward an “emic” perspective.

#### ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CHÖD STUDIES

In Western secondary literature on Chöd, almost none of the studies to date have dealt comprehensively with the music of the tradition, its transmission, pedagogy, and performance, which has resulted in a serious gap in the literature.<sup>46</sup> Previous studies concerned with Tibetan ritual music have given cursory attention to the Chöd ritual (Canzio 1978; Kaufmann 1978; Ellingson 1979), and only one work discusses the music of Chöd or its performance in any detail (Dorjé and Ellingson 1979). That said, in the literature on the enacted musical aspects of the Chöd ritual—besides Dorjé and Ellingson’s article on the *damaru* drum, which I revisit and expand upon with ethnographic detail and analysis in chapter 4—ethnomusicological research had not yet adequately addressed the specific role of musical performance in Chöd. Yet such a role seems vital to our gaining a more complete understanding of Buddhist ritual practice. How does a particular tune relate to a certain section of the liturgy? Does a particular melody and rhythm make meaningful the specific section of the textual liturgy to

which it has been composed? Is it mere accompaniment and decorative art, or is something integral to the meditation practice embedded in the music and/or occurring through musical performance?

Although I had learned to practice, and then taught musical aspects of the Chöd ritual for several years, when I posed these questions to my teachers, they often redirected my attention to the *meaning* of Chöd practice: (1) the analytical meditation on the relationship of the corporeal body to the “self;” and, (2) the analysis of the connection between the mind’s “grasping” to the corporeal body and all other phenomena as if they were self-existent and intrinsically good or bad, and the experience of suffering as a result of regarding phenomena uncritically as such. The music of the ritual performance was largely de-emphasized as a site of meaning beyond the notion that, in performing the melodies exactly as one’s teacher had, the practitioner could obtain both (i) the lineage lamas’ blessings, and (ii) the realizations imbued within the melodies. Indeed, the melodies are believed to contain the blessings and realizations of the lineage lamas since exceptional adepts who composed the melodies were practitioners of the tradition.<sup>47</sup> Yet, from the Mahāyāna point of view, the most important aspect underlying Chöd practice is the essential inculcation of the correct motivation for the practice: the attitude of renunciation (weariness with cyclic existence), and *bodhicitta* (altruistic wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings, who are subject physically, cognitively, and emotionally to suffer due to various causes and conditions in cyclic existence), and combining both with the view of “emptiness.” These three are known as the “three principal paths” (Tib. *lam gyi gtso bo rnam gsum*), and form the foundation of the Chöd Tradition. According to my teachers, when engaging in Chöd practice, it was to be an exercise of my understanding of these three principal paths. In a sense, then, I was performing philosophy—turning theory into practice.

Even while engaged in interdisciplinary ethnomusicological research, I understood my role was to follow the prescribed indigenous method of learning the tradition, particularly given the rarefied context and privilege of having a one-to-one individualized teacher-student transmission of the ritual. I was taught that the meaning of Chöd was important insofar as I could learn not only to perform the *sādhana*, but also to practice the values of the tradition throughout my life. I would therefore likely not need to transcribe the melodies to gain more access to the meaning, but rather could draw upon my own meditation experience and the oral testimonies of recognized practitioners regarding the music and its importance to aspects of the tradition. The indigenous informants’ interpretations of the significance of the music were primarily to inform my understanding, and I was merely to act

as a conduit in assisting the tradition to survive some generations longer by preserving this valuable information. Initially, it was understood that musical transcription could later serve as a prescriptive tool in assisting in the preservation of the tradition, but it would not be needed for analytical purposes.

An earlier era of ethnological inquiry would have had me mask my “emic” position in favor of a more “objective” accounting of the ritual and significance of its performance.<sup>48</sup> What is an ideal position within ethnomusicological discourse today? For the past twenty years, ethnomusicologists have followed cultural anthropologists in situating ethnographic studies by making positionality (personal identities and biases) explicit such that the lens through which a musical ritual is filtered is made known to the reader. As a specific disciplinary program, ethnomusicologists attempt to gain as close a perspective on a tradition as possible. When appropriate, while studying oral traditions of South and Central Asia,<sup>49</sup> for example, they learn to perform a tradition through an apprenticeship. Yet, they are cautioned not to retain an insider’s perspective and “go native” to such an extent that they would lack the critical distance needed to view the tradition from an outsider’s perspective.

The legacy of this approach, with its complicated tension in balancing emic-etic concerns, is historically drawn from an ethical code underlying anthropological inquiry. This code works in concert with an earlier anthropological paradigm of preferably leaving undisturbed that which, and those whom, the ethnographer encounters.<sup>50</sup> This code has since changed, such that the idea of engaging in research without meaningful involvement beyond one’s own project is no longer expected or advisable. With the instituting of a new ethical code in favor of greater reciprocity, there is an expectation that a researcher will attempt to maintain ongoing relationships with the individual consultants and community where the ethnographer studied. Steven Feld has made several return visits to the community of the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea and is among the best-known exemplars of this ethnographic practice of “return.”

#### A SHIFT IN RESEARCH ANALYSIS: AN END TO “DISCIPLINARY BLINDERS”

During the final stage of my research I learned that my methodology was limiting me from seeing deeper connections between performance elements of the ritual (rhythm and melody), music and liturgical elements (melody and poetry), and all three together (poetry, melody, and rhythm). Because I followed the disciplinary swing away from musical analysis and toward the ethnographic, I had explored the Chöd meditation practice

and musical performance as separate elements that combined only in the process of performing the ritual. What ethnomusicologist Udo Will calls the “intradisciplinary imperialism” during the initial period of my research, was corroborated by other ethnomusicologists whose critical approaches to examining recent trends in the methodology of the discipline confirmed my understanding that much in the Chöd ritual music performance had yet to be researched.<sup>51</sup> It seems that I had on “disciplinary blinders” and was metaphorically walking along a path unaware of the scope of interesting material in the forest around me. To disclose what my research process had been before reaching this point: I had attempted to approach scholarship through a method that was faithful both: (1) to the traditional process of transmission of the Chöd Tradition (learning by rote as close to one’s teacher’s understanding, instruction, and performance technique as possible), and (2) to the then current of ethnomusicological thought.

Udo Will critiques the “emic-etic distinction” at the height of the turn away from nonverbal data in the ethnoscientific encounter:

Since the unfortunate introduction of K. Pike’s emic-etic distinction into the ethno sciences, there has been a tendency of *intradisciplinary imperialism* whereby the emic strategy deliberately denies the validity of alternative research options. There is the insistence of many ethnoscientists that inquiries into the field of human culture is only definable in emic terms, and that means, only with reference to the way people talk about it . . . Emic commitments have become blatant, insistent and parochial and there is an air of scholasticism or of arm chair detachment about much of the formal analysis of the new ethnography including ethnomusicology . . . not denying the scientific credentials ethno linguistics has brought to certain domains of the ethno sciences . . . due to their fixation on verbal behaviour, they are unable to see the importance of other, non-verbal behaviour and its structural manifestations.<sup>52</sup>

Other scholars have expressed an undercurrent of apprehension about the direction of the new musicology. Jane Sugarman reached the same critical perspective toward the dominant interpretive paradigm of privileging “ethnoaesthetics” that describes the initial research approach I undertook in my musical apprenticeship.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, like myself, she finds that “ethnoaesthetics” is a “necessary but not sufficient” interpretive methodological approach. Sugarman writes: