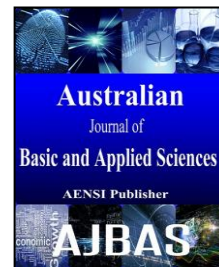




ISSN:1991-8178

## Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences

Journal home page: www.ajbasweb.com



### Tibetan Buddhist Vocal Music: *Chod Dbyangs* as a Tool for Mind Cultivation

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 13 June 2015

Accepted 5 August 2015

Available online 12 August 2015

##### Keywords:

Tibetan Buddhist Vocal Music, *Chod Dbyangs*, Mind and Music

#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study examines a type of Tibetan Buddhist vocal music, *chod dbyang*, in Kagyu sect with specific emphasis on phet singing. It traces the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism and focuses on the esoteric practice of *dbyang chod*. It also marks the function of Tibetan Buddhist vocal music as the religious means to cultivate the mind to develop Buddha's highest wisdom and qualities, as well as to reach the goal of Buddhahood. Previous analyses of selected musical criteria show that *chod dbyang* and its phet singing are sung in softly prolonged leveled tones, relaxed and slow manner, and curly accents noted with high volume and intensity. Objective: i) To understand the religious meanings and functions of *chod dbyangs* in mind cultivation and purification. ii) To analyze in depth the inner play of the mind during purification process and how the mind can be further positively transformed by using different forms of vocal sounds. Results: The subtle inner nature of the mind in relation to the vocal sounds is revealed. This study refines the studies of how our minds work in the positive transformation of our true nature via vocal music, as claimed by Tibetan Buddhism Conclusion: The vocal music is not merely a form of performing arts in *chod dbyangs* ritual but a tool for mind cultivation to attain the highest purity of mind and wisdom of humanity, and ultimately the Buddhahood.

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To Cite This Article: Lee Suan Chong., Tibetan Buddhist Vocal Music: *Chod Dbyangs* as a Tool for Mind Cultivation. *Aust. J. Basic & Appl. Sci.*, 9(26): 56-60, 2015

#### INTRODUCTION

*Chod* is a particular esoteric practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Today, *chod* is widely practiced in all four sects of Tibetan Buddhism: *Nyingma*, *Gelug*, *Sakya* and *Kagyu*. It is also practiced among monks and lay practitioners (known as *yogi*) in Tibet, Nepal, India, Bhutan and Mongolia.

Herein is contained the condensed explanation of *Offering the body as a gift*, called "Garden of Joy," *Machig Labdron* and the *Foundation of Chod* and the *chod* text are the main resources in this research. The study focuses mainly on the individual *chod dbyangs* ritual with an attempt to reveal the intimate relationship between mind and the vocal music practiced in Tibetan Buddhism.

While we as the generation with highly developed science and technology have only positioned ourselves at the early stage to understand the subtlety between our mind and music, Buddhists and others such as Confucius had already known and gone in depth in this subject nearly three thousand years ago. In Chinese, Japanese and Korean musical tradition with its thousands years of history, music is defined in different levels of realms and the highest

musical realm can be achieved only by those with the highest sacred qualities and wisdom (Confucius, C1963).

This shows that there were groups of humans who had already developed the science of mind and music in the ancient time and the knowledge was regarded essential for more meaningful contributions and achievements in human life.

#### *Chod Dbyangs Practice:*

In Buddhism, the sacred chant is the vocal tool for mind cultivation and mind is the key for all positive transformations to achieve the highest level of purity and wisdom. With the profound understanding of the play and nature of the mind, Tibetan Buddhist masters utilize the vocal music or chants very wisely in enhancing one's innate positive qualities through mental cultivation.

*Chod* practice is designed within the setting of a sacred ritual mainly in a singing or chanting form known as *dbyangs*. *Chod dbyangs* ritual, accompanied by musical instruments including *dril bu* (a bell), *rkang-gling* (a trumpet) and *dramaru* (2 sided drum), functions to help the practitioners eliminate ego clinging and to attain ultimate

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understanding of their own true nature which is often referred to as “Buddha nature.”

According to the *chod* text and commentary given by H. E. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodo Taye, *chod dbyangs* serves as an aid for mind purification during the practice (Taye, 1993; Lodo, 1989). During *chod* practice, the practitioner chants according to a set of sacred texts that provides guidance and teachings for

the practitioner to cultivate pure minds. *Chod dbyangs* is also a form of ritual with specific significance on its sporadic and repeated vocalization of the Tibetan word “*phet*” (pronounced “pay”) which acts as the sharpest sounding weapon to cut the ego. In *chod* teachings, *phet* is predominantly used during recitations of *chod dbyangs* to cut through thoughts in which ego is rooted (ibid.).



**Fig. 1:** Lama Tempa Gyaltsen (Tibetan Buddhist monk from Kagyu Thegchen Ling, Honolulu) practicing chod: right hand playing dramaru and left hand playing dril bhu. Photo: author.

Buddha teaches mental illnesses, stresses and defilements that bring about human major life problems are caused by the accumulative impure thoughts habitually developed in one’s mind through countless past lives. Tibetan Buddhism defines human true nature as a union of wisdom and compassion inextricable from emptiness. However, human’s omnipotent nature is obscured due to impure thoughts resulted from ego-clinging and as a result, humans are trapped in continuous suffering rebirth circles. Buddhist teachings clearly indicate that the impure thoughts can be cleansed and purified through Buddhist constant long period of practices in rituals (Rinchen, 1999b). Ego is demolished and ultimate enlightenment to be freed from all sufferings is possible once all thoughts are “reabsorbed in the immensity of primordial awareness” (Kalu, 1995: 20).

#### **Musical Functions of Chod Dbyangs Chants:**

*Chod dbyangs* chanting is not considered as a form of performing arts in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is regarded merely as a Buddhist practice

derived from the ancient wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism, using voices as tools, to create a mental platform for the practitioners to deeply understand and cultivate their minds. The mind is found to be the key that determines all the musical characteristics and vocal qualities in *chod dbyangs* practice that bear indispensable responsibility to elevate the practitioners’ spiritual attainment (Taye, 1993).

My previous study in *chod dbyangs* shows the elements that formulate the musical phenomena of *chod dbyangs*, with various explorations into several selective vocal aspects of *phet* that lead to a deeper understanding in the process of music making in Tibetan Buddhist sacred vocal music. The study was capable of disclosing some segments of *chod dbyangs* and the *phet* singing, which are sung totally based on individual impulsive mental dispositions and Buddhist religious purposes. It is found in the study that the musical compositions of *chod dbyangs* are not pre-determined by a “composer”, nor formulated by any type of vocal techniques or artistic preferences. The chant is totally and directly framed by a practitioner’s mind at the time of the practice.

Therefore, it is found that the musical characteristics of *chod dbyangs* and its *phet* singing differ from one practitioner and performance to another. The musical elements of *chod dbyangs* mirrors the practitioner’s mental activities, inner emotions and states of mind whereas all the *phet* singing in the chant are spontaneous and instinctive vocal impulse produced

during the performances. The practitioners shape the musical characteristics of the chant, not a result of their artistic desires and creativities, but the subconscious and conscious reflections of their mental activities in Buddhist sacred practice (Chong, 2011).

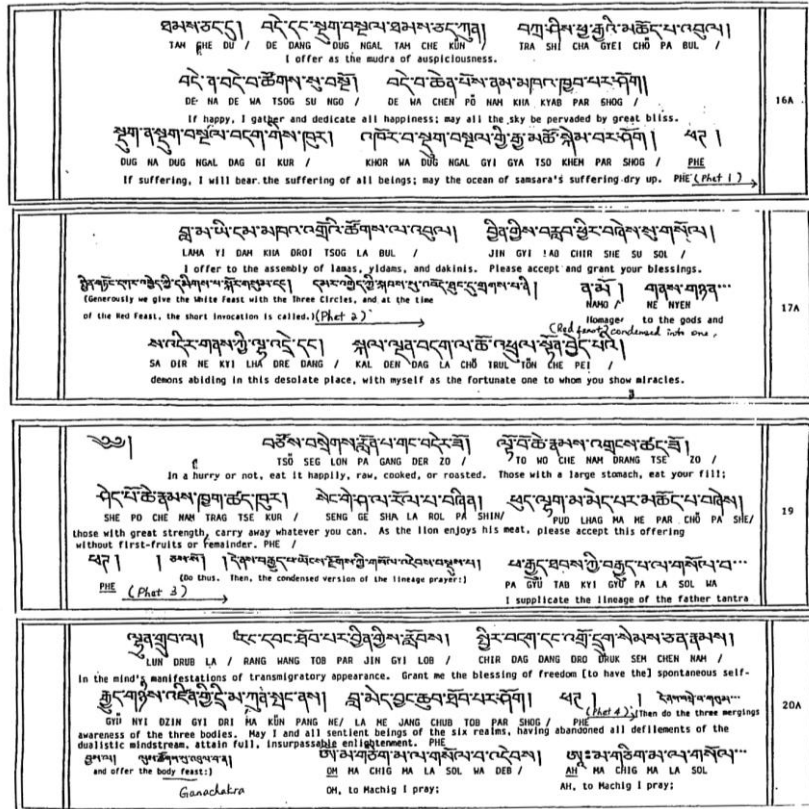


Fig. 2: Examples of phet sections: phet 1, phet 2 and phet 3. Excerpt from “Chod: condensed daily practice of offering the body,” prepared by Lama Lodo (1989: 16A, 17A, 19, 20A).

In *chod* teaching, *chod dbyangs* serves two main functions. The first is to purify the mind through cultivation of Buddha’s holy pure qualities by meditative chanting and practice according to the prayers; the other is to cut through thoughts in order to free the mind from mental afflictions and defilements (Rinchen, 1999a). Through *chod dbyangs* practice, the practitioners would gain both good merits and healthy pure minds through the repeated remembrance and understandings of Buddha’s holy teachings in the prayers that are being enhanced by the magical tricks done by vocal music in increasing the concentrative ability and positive eclipse in the practitioners’ minds (Rinchen, 1999b).

As discussed in my “Tibetan Buddhist Vocal Music: Analysis of the *Phet* Singing in *Chod Dbyangs*”, the vocal characteristics of *chod dbyangs* practice are mainly divided into: i) soft-level dragging tones; ii) slow pace; iii) short and sharp accented tones (Chong, 2011).

My previous study finds that *chod dbyangs* is sung mostly in softness and less fluctuating tones as

it will create a peaceful atmosphere in the minds of the practitioners. Chanting in such a way also creates peaceful and serene feelings to the listeners around. Therefore, the prayers usually well benefit not only the practitioners but also the people who are listening and receiving a similar impact from the chant.

In a deeper level, it is realized from the Buddhist teachings that the musical sounds are able to draw the attention of the practitioners as our mundane minds are inclined to grasp on outer objects. The practitioner normally clings on the sound of the chants due to the habitual inclination of attachment – an impure defilement claimed by Buddha as a result of ego-clinging. Intelligently, the *chod dbyangs* ritual is designed in using vocal music as a platform for the mind of the practitioner to adhere for a long period of time. By setting the mind onto a controlled position of the vocal sounds, the practitioner is able to focus and concentrate more easily and efficiently without being led astray by disturbing or defiled thoughts. In this higher concentrated and clear-minded state, the sacred text with its profound meanings can be

precisely chanted and better absorbed by the practitioner. Hence, it is an effective training method for the Tibetan Buddhists to excel in their spiritual practices (Rinchen, 1999c).

The particular vocal nature of soft and level dragging tones in the chant are chosen as the practitioner tend to cease to have any further fluctuating emotions that he collects from his daily life problems and pressures when he abides along the prolonged soft level pitched chanting. As the mind pays attention to the vocal sound, it eventually follows the sound pattern and keeps a calm and steady state. The calm and steady state of the minds will result in calmness, peacefulness and equanimity which are the positive qualities of humanity and of the Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* if they are to be practiced to the fullest (ibid.).

Slowness is another musical element in the chants of *chod dbyangs*. The slowness is a way to calm one's mind by not stirring any dramatic emotions such as nervousness, worries, fear, competitive attitude etc. The quiet and expanding space in the slowness forms a conducive mental environment for the practitioners to be immersed in the states of equipoise, nothingness and eventually calmness. Therefore, besides softness and less fluctuating tones, a more experienced *chod* practitioner usually chants *chod dbyangs* in slow tempo. Slowness puts his mind at equipoise and nothingness, and opens up a promising opportunity for him to turn his attention inward, to be aware, understand and cultivate his own mind (Chong, 2011). After a long period of training in the ritual, a practitioner is able to transform his negative mental habitual pattern to a positive one. His mind will be gradually purified and the clarity of his wisdom will manifest (Rinchen, 1999c). This is a counter antidote to reverse the habitual tendency of human that pays more attention on phenomena outside his mind, consequently gets distressed and influenced by the happenings outside, not knowing what happens to his own self. Normally, a distressed and mentally troubled person gets sick and is helpless in finding a way to cure himself. *Chod dbyangs* practice enhances a person's mental ability and wisdom to know the inner depth of his life problems and to heal himself through his mental strength.

As the mind is purified and sacred qualities of the divine are cultivated, the practitioners travel forward through further advanced meditative practice in *chod* and aim for higher levels of realization that develop entirely within the minds of the practitioners, not involving any physical or outer phenomena. It is believed in Buddhism that all phenomena are manifestation of one's own mind. Even the ultimate enlightenment of Buddha is attained within one's mind (Kalu, 1995).

The intention of cutting thoughts and ego in *chod dbyangs* practice has caused the formation of short and sharp accented tones with high volume and

intensity in its *phet* singing. The vocal nature reflects the great determination and awareness cultivated by the practitioners during the practice. The practitioners call out the penetrative short-accented *phets* when they give rise to impure thoughts because the *phet* functions to cut that rising thoughts.

The sharp and intensified tones in *phet* calling act as indestructible diamond knife to cut off and liberate the thoughts that arise and clung on in the practitioner's mind. The practitioner will be promptly awakened from his fantasies and become free from any thoughts. At this state, he is able to pay full attention and returns to his intended practice of meditation to abide on the pure nature of his mind without any disturbance of deluded thoughts. Tibetan Buddhism claims that thoughts are where mental afflictions originate. They are considered the root of the "illusion of samsara and the erroneous attachment to self that hinders the realization of the nature of the mind" (Edou, 1996: 45). The very loud and determined *phet* singing trains the practitioner to develop the great strength and powerful nature in his mind. In consequence, the mind will expand naturally into limitless vastness and space, growing in thickness of positive qualities, especially "positive willpower", within its true inherent nature – that actually mirrors the vocal quality of "*phet!*". Hence, vocal sounds of *phet* become the guide to lead the practitioner into opening the path for him to search inward, see and realize his own true nature of mind by following the instructions of the *chod* sacred text.

Jerome Edou presents Machig Labdron's authentic teachings of the *chod* in his *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod*. He defines *phet* as "the nature of emptiness", a practitioner rests in his true nature beyond or devoid of all conceptualization at the moment he calls "*phet!*" (ibid.: 43-4).

### Conclusions:

Buddha teaches that our minds are deluded most of the time in our daily life with very heavy laziness to wake up when we are not armed with awareness, clarity and positive thoughts. This is a condition where attachment, anger and ignorance can be very easily developed within us as those defilements are rooted in deluded thoughts. According to Buddhism, this is also the main reason humans are lost in samsaric sufferings without an end (Kalu, 1995). Therefore, *chod dbyangs* and its special *phet* singing aim to train the practitioners to cultivate and sustain in positivity and purity of mind through a long term of practice.

*Chod dbyangs* practice is proven in Buddhist tradition to be very effective and the impact continues even during the post-meditation sessions. Positive mind transformation develops in rapid speed as the practitioners are taught to visualize the real life as the Buddha pure land and see every day noises as the sacred chants of *chod dbyangs* and *phet* singing -

taking all opportunities in life to be trained in purity of mind (Rinchen, 1999c).

Hence, through the vocal vessel of *chod dbyangs*, the highest wisdom and fullest positive qualities can be accomplished within one's pure mind and, as proudly proclaimed by Tibetan Buddhism, one is able to attain Buddhahood even within one lifetime.

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