

***PHET* SINGING IN *CHOD DBYANGS*: MUSIC AS A REFLECTION OF MIND**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intimate relationship between music and mind, based on a specific research in Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu lineage vocal music, *phet* singing of *chod dbyangs*. Tibetan Buddhists utilize the vocal music as a tool that purifies the mind. The word *phets* are sung mainly in curtly accents noted with high volume and intensity or softly prolonged tones in a relaxed manner. There is no pre-set tune or specific musical notation for *phet* singing. Moreover, the chants differ from one performer and performance to another.

The research aims to look into the reasons why musical phenomena are claimed to be a manifestation of mind in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This study discovers that diverse aspects of the mind have collectively framed the musical natures of *phet* singing in *chod dbyang*. The study discusses further on how various mental states of mind are reflected directly through the different musical characteristics of *phets*. It also points out the music as a language code of mind, which depicts the mental states and thoughts of the performers during their performances.

The study reveals the wisdom and essence underlying Tibetan Buddhist music, and it may further lead towards the finding of the true nature of all music created by humans.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhist Vocal Music and Mind

Introduction

This paper examines the main musical characteristics of *phet*¹ singing in the *chod dbyangs*, of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu sect. Through investigation of the relationship between mental states and the musical phenomena of *phet* singing, this study aims to discover the profound meanings behind the vocal music practiced in the Tibetan Buddhist music tradition.

Chod is a particular esoteric practice in Tibetan Buddhism. It finds representation via the vocal musical form known as *chod dbyangs*. The Tibetan word *phet* (pronounced ‘pay’) appears frequently in *chod dbyangs*. *Phet* is a Tibetan word barely used in colloquial language. The word *phet* combines two Tibetan consonants, *pa* and *tra*. *Pa* means skillful methods and *tra* is wisdom (Das 1960). According to the practices of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu sect, there are seven parts found in the middle of the *chod dbyangs* routine wherein practitioners conduct various forms of meditation: visualizations, cutting of thoughts and the cultivation of a pure mind. Practitioners do not chant from other texts during the performance of these seven sections, preferring to sing only the word *phet* in a repeated and sporadic manner (Lodo 1989).

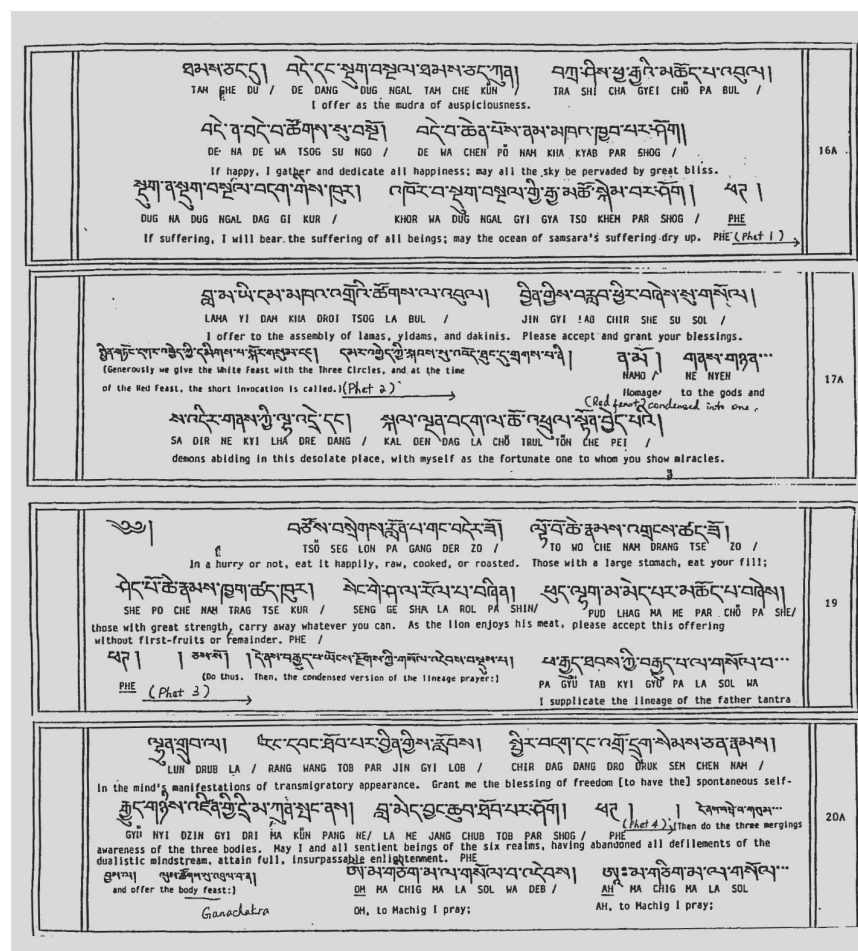


Figure 1. Examples of *phet* sections: *phet* 1-4. Excerpt from “*Chod: condensed daily practice of*

¹ *Phet* is a Tibetan word little used in colloquial language. Two Tibetan consonants, *pa* and *tra*, combine to form the word *phet*. *Pa* means skillful methods and *tra* is wisdom. Therefore, when pronouncing the word *phet*, the *chod* practitioner merges his skillful methods and wisdom to destroy thoughts (Rinchen 1999c).

offering the body,” prepared by Lama Lodo (1989: 16A, 17A, 19, 20A)

In *chod* teachings, *phet* singing serves two main functions. The first is to guide the stages of visualization, the other is to cut through thoughts in order to purify the mind. According to the *chod* text and commentary given by H. E. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodo Taye, *phet* functions as an aid for mind purification during the chanting of *chod dbyangs* (Taye 1993). It is designed to help practitioners eliminate ego-clinging and to attain an ultimate understanding of their own true nature, which is often referred to as ‘Buddha nature’ (Powers 1995, 97-8). One’s mind is not pure because it is always contaminated by thoughts. Practitioners are unable to see their inner ‘Buddha nature’ if their minds are impure. Consequently, Tibetan Buddhists utilize vocal music as a means to cultivate a pure mind in the pursuit of ultimate liberation (Rinchen 1999d). A pure state of mind manifests limitless power, wisdom and compassion and it is claimed by Tibetan Buddhism as the true nature of all beings in the universe (Trungpa 1991). After a practitioner has been chanting *chod dbyangs* (including *phets*) for a certain period of time his mind will reach a higher degree of purity, wherein states of realization about the ultimate truth of all phenomena and self are attained. As practitioners continue to perform the vocal music in the ritual, they are able to reach the highest realizations of Buddhahood (Palmo 1988). This bears out the claims of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners who have long proclaimed that all musical practices in the religion are but tools to serve the purpose of guiding the mind towards ultimate enlightenment (Lodo 2000a).

Chod was devised by a Tibetan woman named Machig Labdron (1055-1145 A.D.), as a manifestation from *dharmata*² in the form of *Prajnaparamita*³ (Facchini 1981). The philosophical basis of *chod* is the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*: a Buddhist teaching regarding ‘The Perfection of Wisdom’ (Kalu 1995b, 143). In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *chod dbyangs* are believed to be the holy vocal music of Buddha’s realm, transmitted to the human realm through dreams, profound states of meditation or through the higher stages of realization attained by the Tibetan Buddhist great masters, such as Machig Labdron (Edou 1996).

² *Dharmata* means ‘the essence of reality’ in Tibetan Buddhism.

³ *Prajnaparamita* is referred to as ‘the mother of all the Buddhas’.



Figure 2. Thangka of Machig Labdron.

Chod dbyangs chanting and *phet* singing are orally transmitted, memorized and relayed from one generation to another. No pre-set melodies are ever written by any composers for its performance. *Chod dbyangs* chants are to be found in several texts located in the monasteries where the practitioners are trained. In addition, the melodies in the chanting also differ according to the sect, monastery, master and even time period. Even within the same monastery, the *chod dbyangs* ritual may differ from one performer and performance to the next (Gyaltshen 2000). Here, the question arises as to why Tibetan Buddhist masters do not insist on conformity in the performance of *chod dbyangs* and *phets*.

Practitioners call out *phets* spontaneously according to their religious motivation at the specific moment of performance. *Phets* are uttered in the same way as verbal expressions in daily conversation. The pitches of the *phets* are not confined to any particular scale or range and performers have total freedom to pronounce the *phet* at any pitch (Chong 2009). Through interviews with Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu practitioners, participation in the rituals of the Tibetan Buddhist

masters⁴ and private audiences with the gurus, the author was able to explore the process of musical composition in *phet* singing in detail.

In the graph in Figure 2, the *phets* singing of Lama Karma Rinchen's (a Tibetan Buddhist monk from Kagyu Thegchen Ling monastery in Honolulu) *chod dbyangs* routine are represented by dots and lines. In this section - as in all of the required seven - only the word *phet* is chanted.

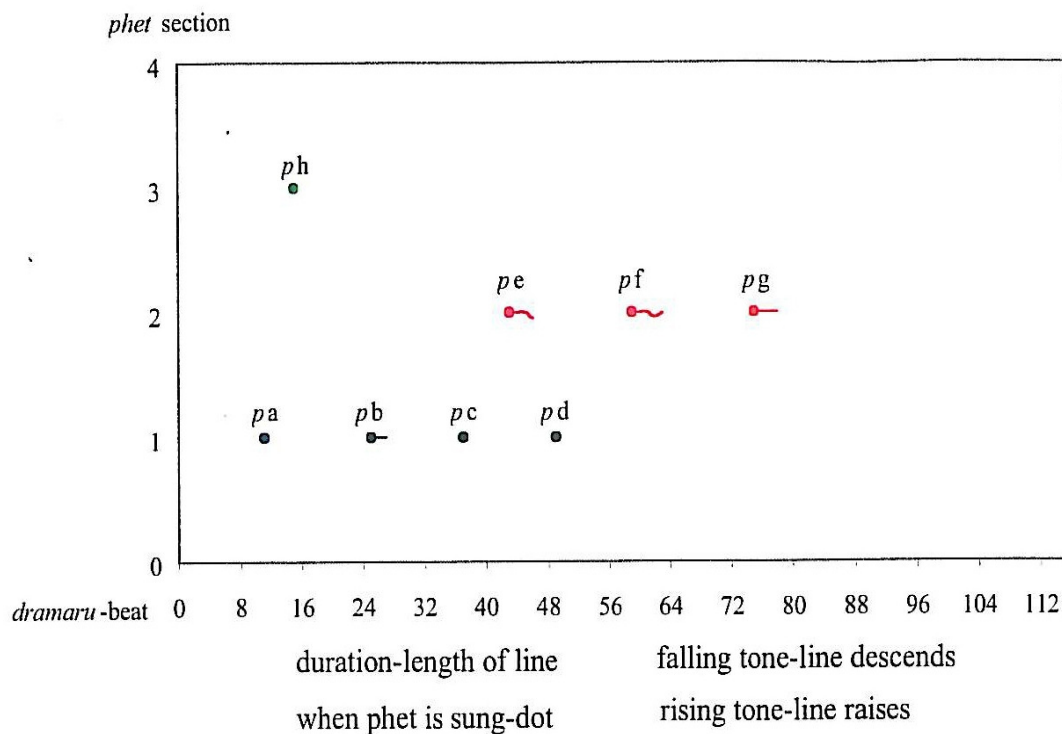
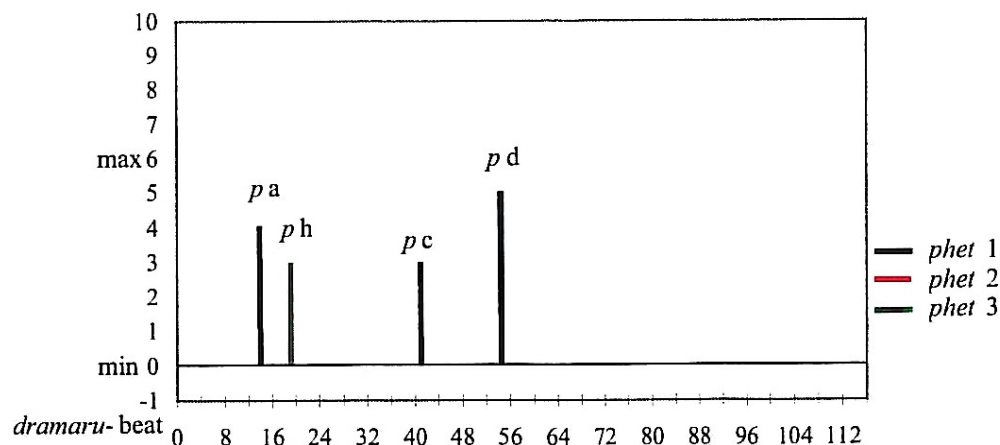


Figure 3. An example of *phet* singing - transcription of Lama Karma Rinchen's *phet* sections in his *chod dbyangs* chant



⁴ Tibetan Buddhist masters include His Holiness 14th Dalai Lama, His Holiness 17th Karmapa, His Eminence Trangu Rinpoche, His Eminence Khenpo Tsultrim Gyaltso Rinpoche and His Eminence Bokar Rinpoche.

Figure 4. Sound intensity of Lama Karma Rinchen's short-accented *phets*

Table 1. The sound qualities and contours for Lama Karma Rinchen's *phet* sections

<i>Phet</i> Section	<i>Phet</i>	Sound Qualities and Contours
<i>Phet 1</i>	<i>Pa</i>	short, moderately loud, moderately accented
	<i>pb</i>	moderately soft, dragging
	<i>pc</i>	short, moderately soft, slightly accented
	<i>pd</i>	short, loud, moderately accented
<i>Phet 2</i>	<i>pe</i>	moderately soft, dragging, fall at end, heavy
	<i>pf</i>	soft, dragging, light, descend and ascend at end
	<i>Pg</i>	soft, dragging, heavy
<i>Phet 3</i>	<i>Ph</i>	short, moderately loud, moderately accented
No <i>phet</i> from <i>phet 4</i> to <i>phet 7</i>		

According to the long Buddhist Kagyu history of *chod dbyangs* chanting, there are two main types of *phet*, namely:

1. Short and accented
2. Soft and dragging

Two other unique characteristics are commonly found in the samples: one is a tailing off at the end of a *phet*; the other is a drop followed by a slight lift at the close. These two attributes are usually attributed to the soft dragging *phets*. (Chong 2009).

'Short-accented' and 'soft-dragging' *phets* are to be the main focus of this paper since they represent the essence of *phet* singing. These defining characteristics appear only at the spots where the practitioners are required to carry out the religious practices of cutting thoughts and visualization. At other points, when the practitioners do not need to cultivate such practices, no *phets* are sung. All *chod* practitioners are trained in a similar manner mentally and spiritually (Taye 1993). Further explanations about other musical characteristics of *phet* singing can be found in author's "Mind & Music: an analysis of *phet* singing in *chod dbyangs*".

In-depth research shows that two significant mental states are prevalent among the Kagyu *chod* practitioners during the singing of the *phets*:

1. A mental state combining the strength and determination necessary to eliminate and dissolve thoughts that arise in the mind and to push the visualized mystic fluids in the visualization of 'transference of consciousness or *powa*' (Ibid.).
2. A mental state combining calmness, equanimity and a sense of peace necessary to promote clear visualization and the cultivation of a pure mind directed towards the attainment of Buddhahood (Rinchen 2000a).

Three sets of visualizations are mentally imagined by practitioners during *phet* singing: transference of consciousness or *powa*, three cycles of white feasts condensed into one or four guests and *Ganacakra* or feast offerings (Lodo 1989). The various types of visualization are different forms of Tibetan Buddhist meditation as well as body offerings associated with the accumulation of merit and wisdom (Patrul 1994, 297-8). Practitioners also conjure up visualizations of various offerings to

please and pay homage to the higher beings, to satisfy those who make demands on them (such as debt collectors) and to eliminate the suffering of all beings in *samsara* with the *dharma*⁵ of liberation (Taye 1993, 23-4). Meanwhile by offering their most precious human bodies in their visualizations, the practitioners cut themselves off from the three poisons: desire-attachment, hatred-aversion and ignorance - the products of the identification with an 'I', to attain the ultimate state of enlightenment (Kalu 1995b, 142-3).

Detailed research into the mental activities of the practitioners during rituals, reveals that they change their mental state every time they produce different musical variations of a *phet*. Needless to say, practitioners are not required to engage in *phet* singing when their minds are clear of intrusive thoughts or religious visualizations (Chong 2009).

When practitioners need to generate the necessary strength and determination to dissolve a persistent thought during meditation, they are taught to sing the word *phet* repeatedly as an aid to the religious process of cutting thoughts (Lodo 2000a). They produce loud, sharp and forceful *chants* to interrupt the intrusive thoughts. These are known as short-accented *phets*. On the other hand, when practitioners visualize pushing the imagined mystic fluids through different visualization stages of 'transference of consciousness or *powa*', they imagine themselves having sufficient energy to resist gravity, a feat which enables them to push the fluids quickly and successfully from one imagined body point to another (Gyaltshen 2000). At each stage, the practitioners call out a loud and forceful *phet* mirroring his thoughts. Although the fluids do not actually exist in reality, it is the habitual mentality of the practitioners to act as if they exist. As the Tibetan Buddhist masters explain, the mind affects the actions of human beings (Kalu 1995a). Such actions are generally regarded as unconscious.

During other visualizations, practitioners have to enter into a state of calmness and equanimity. According to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, adopting such mental states ensures that the mind is not disturbed and allows practitioner to visualize pictures of incredible clarity. They will sing a *phet* at each stage of the visualization. Right before they utter the *phet*, they have to put their minds into a state of complete relaxation (Rinchen 2000a). The *phets* sung while the practitioner moves between these different states of mind are very soft, serene and slow. They sound like drones that are dragged at level pitch, and they are dropped only at the very end - a sign of relaxation.

The visualizations are sometimes employed together with the practice of cutting thoughts. At that time, both the short-accented and soft-dragging *phets* are found mingled together in the middle part of the *chod dbyangs*. These transformations between mental states via visualization, are signaled by soft-dragging *phets*. Conversely, when, practitioners need to dissolve thoughts, they resort to using short-accented *phets*.

This analysis shows that the distinctive musical character of *phet* compositions is directly attributable to the varying mental states of the practitioner. The author's research has established that mental states of calmness, relaxation, equanimity and peace result in musical sounds that are soft, slow, prolonged and serene; whereas mental states corresponding to great strength, will and determination result in the production of sounds that are short, loud, sharp and forceful.

Calmness equates with softness and stillness in the mind, a condition induced by similar musical sounds. Relaxation releases mental energy into a vast and comforting space, where the mind is free to move in a slow and random way. Thus, the softness and free-flow of the musical lines of *phets* reflect the mental state of relaxation. The peaceful mind projects a serene and blissful aura, which is realised through the serene and soft musical sounds of the *phets*. To analyze the nature of equanimity, it is a mental state that concentrates the energy of sameness and equilibrium in the mind, devoid of any fluctuating mental movements; a state that directs the practitioners to produce

⁵ (Sanskrit) The teachings of Buddhas and other highly realized beings.

prolonged musical sounds at the same pitch. A mind that is powerful and determined is more able to visualise and can conjure up a vast universe when aspiring to greatness. These mental visions are then released into the *phets* and consequently result in sharp, forceful and intensified musical sounds. When the performer is motivated to send forth an object (in this case, the mystic fluids) as quickly as possible to the destination, he projects in his mind a huge energy bursting out swiftly and reaching an end point within an extremely concise distance. These mental pictures and energies are then translated into abridged and sharp musical sounds.

From this research it is evident that the different characteristics of the *phets* reflect the changing nature of the performer's mental state. Music can clearly exhibit the workings of the mind and it is the musical language or vocal codes that 'speak' the musician's thoughts. Therefore, all the performances of *chod dbyangs*, especially *phet* singing, are unique. This is because the musical compositions are the direct results from the mental expositions of the performers at that very moment of the performance, not from any pre-composed melodies. Through delving into the musical language of the *phet*, the importance of adopting positive mental states such as calmness, equanimity and determination during performance can be appreciated. The adoption of various positive mental states is clearly the rationale behind the musical phenomenon known as *phet*.

Through attuning ourselves to the specific qualities of musical sounds, we are able to interpret the various mental states of *chod dbyang* performers. In other words, by exploring the music we produce we are better able to understand the true nature of the mind. Music is clearly a conduit to the mind, allowing us greater rein to explore subtly different mental states, even the subconscious. For over 3500 years, Tibetan Buddhists have possessed the ability to guide the mind towards ultimate enlightenment through music. To the master practitioners and devotees, music is a manifestation of the mind and a direct reflection of mental thoughts, while ritual music specifically is an aid to mental development and the cultivation of a pure mind.

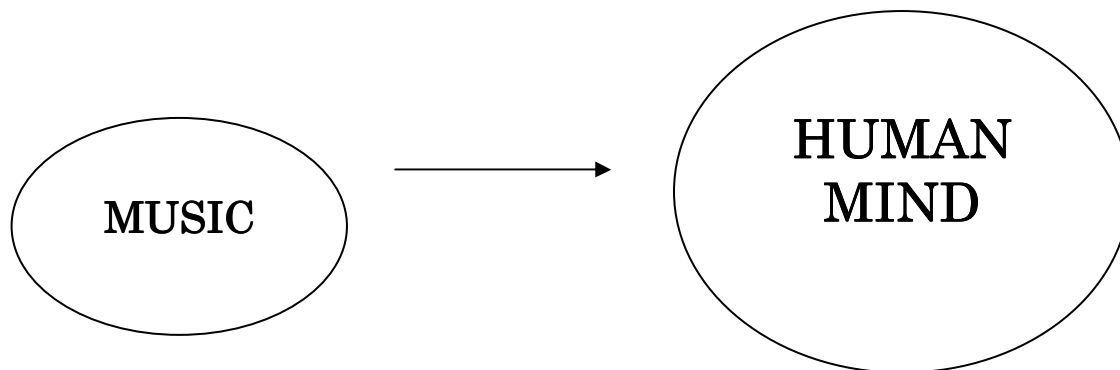


Figure 3. Music is a conduit to the inner mind.

A greater understanding of the connections between music and mental states can only aid our development. Enhanced wisdom will inevitably help us to shed light on the many unresolved mysteries relating to music practice and culture, such as the questions of how indigenous music can induce a trance; how the Chinese were able to cultivate inner qualities through the music of *qu qin* in ancient times; how the Japanese were able to infuse their traditional *Gagaku* court music with meditative energy; how the Javanese are able to promote peace within their societies through their *gamelan* music; and how Tibetan Buddhist are able to use music in their rituals to achieve enlightenment. By exploring music together with the mind, we may be able to find answers to much that is currently inexplicable in the world at large.

Since ancient times, our ancestors have been passing on their wisdom through their musical

legacies. If we can access and interpret this vast reservoir of knowledge it will have great implications for the development of humanity. For example, if ethnomusicologists are able to discover how music helps the shamans enter into a trance state, then we will know how to travel to another dimension of the universe: the spiritual realm. Furthermore, if all humankind knew how Tibetan Buddhists achieve a state of enlightenment through the practice of music rituals, we would have access not only to the highest wisdom and holy realms, but also to ultimate liberation.

A large vein of untapped knowledge awaits us: music offers us a conduit to the mind, its inner most workings and to a greater understanding and appreciation of our musical heritage.

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