



# the radiant gift

The Tibetan kangling -  
human thighbone trumpet

David Chapman

clear the bone's central channel, and blow through it.

Cleaning and especially sawing a bone will put quite a lot of bone dust in the air so wear a dust mask; any kind of dust in your lungs is unhealthy - but even with the mask, you are almost certain to ingest some bone. It has quite an odd taste, but that's part of the fun - and heightens your intimate connection with the dead. If you are squicked by a little recreational cannibalism, you might not be ready to practice chöd - consult your local Buddhist lama before proceeding.

There's a hitch however, living bone is a combination of mostly calcium phosphate and collagen. Calcium is a hard but brittle mineral; collagen is an elastic protein (it also makes up tendons, cartilage, and skin). Together, they are extraordinarily strong. However, when a bone is cleaned and dried, all the collagen goes, and that makes it surprisingly fragile. So, the knee end of kanglings are covered, both to protect them and to hide the fact that they are disintegrating. The covering can be made from skin or metal.

Skin coverings are normally coloured dark reddish-brown to look like they're covered in dried blood, and if it is covered it in metal, that might as well decorate as well. Every kangling combines horror and beauty. Its particular aesthetics may emphasise one or the other of those aspects.

**Top:** a tantric practitioner blows a kangling during a ceremony

**Inset:** Machig Labdrön, the 10th Tibetan woman who originated chöd - a mix of tantric Buddhism and shamanism.

A kangling is a trumpet made from a human thigh-bone, played in tantric Buddhist rituals, particularly a ritual called chöd (Tibetan: cutting) which is designed to remove your emotional attachment to your body. Putting a dead person's leg bone to your mouth - to blow the kangling while practicing - is an intimate reminder of your own mortality.

Chöd is also a celebration of generosity and of your connections to people and other creatures in the web of life and death. Recognising your place in the food chain is a part of that. In chöd, you

blow the kangling to summon demons to a ritual feast - and you are the main course on the menu.

High quality kanglings are now rare and expensive - making your own is more affordable and creates a stronger personal connection with the instrument.

Conceptually, making a kangling is very simple, you start with a human femur (thighbone), which you can easily find lying about in any local charnel ground (you do practice in a charnel ground, don't you?). You cut the hip end off, poke two holes in the knee end,

## FIRST FIND A BONE

You probably already have at least a couple of thighbones around the house. However, it is usually best to find one whose original owner no longer has any use for it. This can be something of a challenge.

Leaving aside various esoteric and improbable options, there are two main approaches. You can buy a cleaned, intact femur, or you can buy a badly made tourist kangling and upgrade it. Try eBay, or Google to find an antiques shop or similar that may be able to sell you



part of an old anatomical skeleton etc'. Do not buy a femur that is burnt at all; those usually have been stolen from cremation sites.

Perhaps somewhat

surprisingly, it is entirely legal to own human bones in most places. You may want to check local law, however.

Kanglings made for tourists may be available in Tibetan import shops or Buddhist centers, the skin will be painted bright red. These are minimally adequate for Buddhist practice, but cheesy. The good thing is that they are usually no more expensive than a bare femur. You can rescue the bone and turn it into something worthwhile. High quality kanglings used to turn up in Tibetan shops, but are now rare and cost many hundreds of pounds.

In Tibet, kanglings were sometimes made from animal bones, wood, or metal. These seem to be poor substitutes, they simply won't have the emotional charge of part of a dead person. Using a plaster cast, or a plastic or other artificial reproduction of femur, is right out. If you try to summon demons with a plastic kangling, they will just laugh at you and it will serve you right.

## CONTEMPLATING CONNECTION

Before you start working on your kangling, I suggest contemplating the bone: both its appearance and its significance.

Horror or disgust may make it difficult to face it squarely. It can be easiest to start by thinking of it as something you'd find on the beach, like a piece of coral. It is, indeed, a beautiful piece of natural history.

Examine it closely. The shape, and the surface texture, are extraordinarily complex. There are rough and smooth areas, rounded pieces and sudden edges. There are subtle variations in colour, from pure calcium white to caramel brown. There are channels for blood vessels, and grooves where muscles attached. You might find it intriguing enough to learn a little about how each of the parts function in the body. Every femur



is unique. My kangling has a rough area that I suspect may be a sign of arthritis. The details are the result of a subtle interplay of biological pattern and random circumstances.

The bone you hold in your hands is the product of four billion years of evolution: a vast history of purposeful lives and accidental deaths. It is, thus, a manifestation of the endless dance of form and emptiness.

You have two bones very much like this one inside your body, mirror images of each other. You could hold the bone against your leg to see how it fits.

It is remarkable how well bodies

work without our thinking about them, or having much understanding or appreciation for them.

Many religions are anti-body - bodies, they say, are messy, disgusting, and impure. They tie you to physical reality, and are full of hormones that drive you into nasty unspiritual sins.

Buddhist tantra is pro-body, bodies are amazing, wonderful, and sacred. They connect you to physical reality, and are full of hormones that drive you toward glorious this-world enlightenment.

It's inescapably obvious that you are holding a piece of dead person. Soon you will be dead too. Remember, you will probably never touch the bones of the people closest to you, so by holding this bone, you have an extraordinarily intimate connection with its original owner - now dead. Probably they were someone about whom you can know nothing. How did they live? What were their hopes, their fears; their triumphs and disasters? How did they die? How

are they remembered?

This bone is, in a sense, their final gift - even if they did not particularly intend that. You should be grateful, in any case. Chöd is a feast of generosity, it affirms that you are willing to give your life, and even your body, for the benefit of others. It is a celebration of your connections in the world-wide web of life and death. Your life, and your death, may touch others profoundly, we are all interrelated in ways we can never fully comprehend.

This article is greatly edited from a much longer article which goes through the whole process of making a kangling in a step-by-step description enabling you to make your own if you wish to.

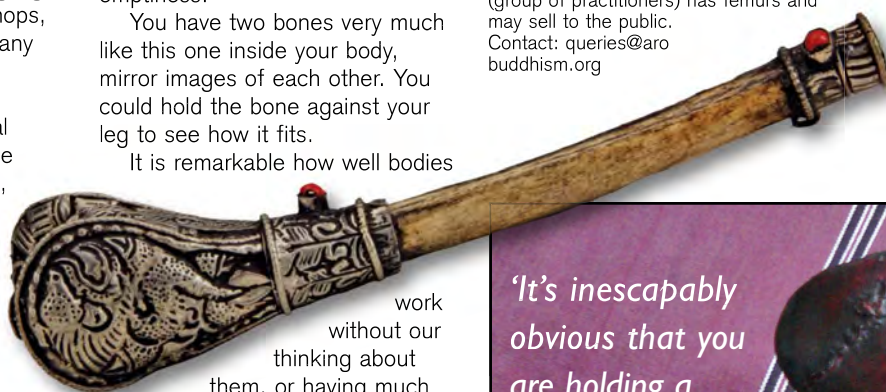
The full text of the article - together with many photographs of kanglings and the stages of construction can be found at: [www.buddhism-for-vampires.com/kangling-chod](http://www.buddhism-for-vampires.com/kangling-chod)

## NOTES

1: The UK Tibetan Buddhist Aro sangha (group of practitioners) has femurs and may sell to the public. Contact: [queries@aro.buddhism.org](mailto:queries@aro.buddhism.org)

**Around page:**  
kanglings with skin covering and one with a silver covering. Care needs to be taken when buying silver ended kanglings as the silver may hide burned bone if the bone has been taken from a cremation fire. This is not considered good

David Chapman practices Tantric Buddhism in the Tibetan Aro gTér lineage. He writes about Buddhism at the web sites 'Buddhism for Vampires' ([buddhism-for-vampires.com](http://buddhism-for-vampires.com)), 'Approaching Aro' ([www.approaching-aro.org](http://www.approaching-aro.org)), and 'Meaningness' ([www.meaningness.com](http://www.meaningness.com)). His background in biomedical science contributed to his article about human thigh-bone trumpets.



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