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It is based in West Wales, and has been published four times a year since 1993.

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

# ULTIMATE GESTURE

NGAKPA RIG'DZIN DORJE OF SANG-NGAK-CHÖ-DZONG  
WRITES ABOUT THE PATH OF TRANSFORMATION

**THE BELL and THUNDERBOLT  
SCEPTRE** (Tib : DRILBU and DORJE  
)

Drilbu and dorje represent complementary aspects of enlightenment; the female solar quality of Wisdom and the male lunar quality of Active Compassion (appropriate activity). These are expressions of the essential principles called Emptiness and Form which were first taught in the Heart Sutra. Form is everything that can arise in consciousness, in thought and feeling and the senses. Emptiness is everything that is not form, and it is realised through meditation. When Emptiness and Form are completely understood, there is nothing that cannot be understood: this is a way of describing enlightenment.

Every feature of Tantric symbolism represents some facet or function of enlightenment. It's like a hologram: if you break it down, every little piece contains the whole thing. The forms of the drilbu and dorje fulfil this principle. When you use them together, the drilbu, in the left hand, is Wisdom, it's ringing sound penetrating everywhere: the dorje, held in the right against the heart, is Active Compassion. But each also contains the other.

The two ends of the thunderbolt are Form, but they emerge from a centre which is Emptiness. The bell-metal is Emptiness, but the half-dorje is Form. There is a female Buddha in between, who is Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom, the Mother of All the Buddhas'. Some bells reinforce this symbol of Emptiness with the addition of an empty circle. When you have the two instruments in front of you, ready to use, you remind yourself of their complementarity by placing them the 'wrong' way round. Then you pick them up with your



Himalayan Buddhist Tantra is called the path of transformation. It brings every aspect of life into the path of practice. Nothing needs to be rejected, everything is a true manifestation of chö, dharma.

Traditionally Tantra tends to be highly secret, because of the profound dangers of misunderstanding this. Through Tantra, everything in life becomes practice, so everything in Tantra is symbolic of realisation, enlightenment.

A heart-felt attraction to Tantric ritual, or iconography, or song, could be every bit as valid a starting point as reading about the teachings. So I hope there will be some benefit in showing and talking about these pictures of ritual objects.

hands crossed, Emptiness on top of Form. And when you put them down you cross your hands the other way, Form over Emptiness.

The dorje, (Sanskrit : vajra) is the stand-alone symbol of the entire Tantric path, the Vajrayana. It has shades of significance such as "adamantine sceptre", "thunderbolt sceptre", "diamond sceptre" ; in other words, the hardest possible substance, so hard that it can shatter all forms of unenlightenment.

Because of their profound symbolism, it is said that a Tantrika (Tantric practitioner) should never be without drillbu and dorje. This is why tengars (rosaries) usually have a little drillbu and dorje ornamenting each pair of counter-beads, so that you have them with you when you are not engaged in ritual activity

A practitioner might permanently wear gold rings ornamented with drillbu and dorje. They are worn on the third fingers of left and right hands respectively. This is to protect the entry points for the energy channels in those fingers, which can potentially be used by other entities to gain access to one's

mindstream. This may be a reflection on the esoteric significance of Western wedding rings. Both men and women tend to wear them on the left hand.

The symbol of that alternates according to gender. This is because the positions of the solar (female) and lunar (male) channels are on opposite sides in men and women<sup>2</sup>. The husband's ring protects his left female side, and the wife's ring, her left male side. Perhaps this is so that other women or men cannot invade their relationship and take the place of the legitimate other. Well, that's the theory.

A really good modern set of drillbu and dorje will have come from a newish mold, and the detailing will not be blurry. Inexpensive sets are made from three metals (copper, tin and iron), but better quality ones are made from five, including gold and silver. The rim is usually a little thicker than the three-metal sets, and the metal is not so white.

The sound should be clear, penetrating and resonant. The five metals echo the five-fold Tantric symbolism of the elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space. Space

(emptiness) is inherent in all the elements, but also takes a central position in its own right.

Common to all the Tibetan Buddhist schools are sets where the dorje has five prongs, ie. four peripheral ones plus the central spike. The Nyingma School, the oldest, also particularly uses ones with nine prongs, eight plus one. In this case they represent the nine paths of Buddhism<sup>3</sup>. The Nyingma School also like to have the thunderbolt parts in copper, because the Tantric Buddha Padmasambhava, the original head of the Lineage, and the origin of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet, is still living on the Glorious Copper-coloured Mountain.

In the case of an old bell, the designs on the bell-metal sometimes give an indication of where it was cast. The bell-metal itself should never be polished; because that is the female part, and the female is already self-perfected. But you cannot be certain that a bell is old just because the bell-metal is black: Kathmandu craftsmen have tricky ways with lampblack, used engine-oil and a blowtorch! On the other hand, a bell that is many centuries old can look as crisp as if it was made yesterday.



**CHOD DRUM and THIGHBONE TRUMPET** (Tib: CHOD-NGA and KANGLING)

This kind of drum is traditionally used to accompany the rite called Chod, which means 'cutting'<sup>4</sup>. This is the practice of cutting off attachment to the physical body. Attachment means using the body as a 'proof' that one has solid, separate, permanent, continuous and definable existence. One meditates on chopping up and boiling this body and miraculously transforming it into nectar. This is then dedicated to all beings, but especially to anyone to whom one owes some karmic debt. These particularly angry beings are then invited to come and devour the nectar, in other words oneself - which they do with delight.

The practice is intensified by performing it in wild, lonely, dangerous or haunted places, especially the vast charnel grounds that used to be common in ancient Asia. Traditionally, one might be told by one's Lama to go off alone for several months and perform the Chod round 108 charnel grounds. But there were also wandering practitioners who made this a lifelong practice. The charnel



grounds were somewhat intermediary places, in between life and death. Our sense of categories and definitions more easily dissolves there. This can make the place fearful, a window into our world for beings from other dimensions. During this period of wandering practice, one would, exceptionally, be relieved of one's teacher's protection. This is in order to experience one's neuroses - one's personal style of enlightenment - with particularly painful and frightening

acuteness. The practice is legendary for giving rise to all sorts of visionary phenomena and realistic hallucinations, sometimes threatening or terrifying. The practitioner allows these visions to dissipate, by remaining in a meditative state of emptiness, where there is no self-existing person who can be threatened.

Chod was elaborated by the great 12C. female Buddha, Machig Labdron, and is practised in all the Tibetan schools. The tunes for the rite are always particularly beautiful, and the drumming can be very complicated. Enforced attention to such details ensures that the practitioner does not, out of fear, skate through the practice superficially.

The large, double-sided Chod drum is played by swivelling it on its axis in the right hand, while playing the bell in the left. The two drum skins each tend to give out a different pitch: this result in a 'g'ding, g'dong' sound, which mimics a heartbeat and helps to break down one's sense of what is 'inside' and 'outside' oneself. The drum is made from two bowl-shaped sections slotted together forming male and female halves.

The traditional way of measuring



oneself for a drum is that its circumference should just fit the round of one's arm, when one's hand is on one's waist. Before the drum is skinned, secret mantras are inscribed round the inside of both bowls. Tibetan wood being rather knotty and unattractive, the drum shells often used to be painted black, but in

the West it is rather nice to display the quality of the wood.

The skins are painted green, the colour of the air element, hence connected with sound. We use Windsor and Newton's Indian Ink, which contains a little shellac and helps to keep out the damp. The strap and the beaters are

best made of pure wool felt. It is not too difficult to do all this in the course of two weekends, (leaving a week in between for the wet skins to dry out). To play smoothly, the beaters have to be rather light, suspended on hangers that are not too thin. Beaters that are too heavy fly around and are very difficult to control when playing slowly.

Drums imported from Kathmandu are usually quite adequate, but need to be completely re-dressed, with new straps, beaters, and tail. From the bottom of the strap is suspended a thick cloud shape, made of layers of fabric, covered in brocade, and out of the cloud streams a brocade tail representing a rainbow. This could be in three sections, in the yogic colours of blue, red, and white; or five sections, in the colours of the elements, arranged hierarchically; blue, green, red, white and yellow, descending from Space to Earth. The tail helps to seat and balance the beings, visible and invisible, for whose benefit one is practising. There may also be small, white cowrie shells, symbols of Emptiness, on the strap on top of the drum.

The drum-case is traditionally ornamented with small bells; the ones made in Mongolia come in a variety of delightful shapes. The jingle of the bells alerts the beings that live in the charnel ground, that dinner is on its way, in the shape of the practitioner, who is thus unable to escape their notice, by sneaking in and out!

The kangling is sounded during the Chod, to summon beings to the feast. It is given three blasts, on a pleasant descending note, to attract their attention and invite them. A kangling that is properly ornamented will have a silver strip running down the top surface, ending with an inset cornelian. This is a kind of landing-strip and dance-floor for the dakinis, the female beings who live especially in the in-between places, like charnel grounds. Cornelian is red, the female colour: the male symbol is turquoise, which the Tibetans sometimes describe as 'white'.

In iconography, the dakinis are always dancing, because it is they who perform the dance of the elements, both into existence and out of existence. So a charnel ground is a very appropriate place for them to live. Padmasambhava spent many years practising in the eight great charnel grounds, some of which occupied entire valleys. There he received secret teachings from the dakinis.

There are detailed traditional instructions from the yogic tradition on how to choose a bone to make a



kangling; but in the monastic tradition bone would not be used at all. A facsimile metal instrument would be used instead.

Many kanglings to be found on sale in India and the Himalayas, are heavily ornamented with base metal, which spuriously enhances their price. The metal is there to disguise the fact that the end of the bone is charred. It is probably cremation debris that has been dredged out of the Ganges at low tide, formerly part of the body of some person whose family were too poor to afford enough wood and oil to consume the extremities of the corpse. Skulls for offering bowls and skull drums are often recovered from similar sources; they need to be paired up, male and female, to make a set. Children's skulls and thigh bones often find their way into use, but this is not correct.

It must be stressed that the export of human bones is nowadays illegal in both India and Nepal, and shippers will not handle them - at least, not without a bribe. The skeleton trade in Calcutta used to supply the medical schools of Europe, but it became notorious for the same reasons as Burke and Hare in England. Skulls used to be relatively easy to obtain from the Pacific, where islanders used to dispose of the remains of WW2 Japanese invaders; until that supply became exhausted, and then they drew the line at recycling their own ancestors.

It is a recurrent conversation in any group of Tantrikas, how they would like to be able to get around the public health legislation, so their own future remains could be put into use by other practitioners. With the easing of restrictions on burial in one's own garden, this may become possible.

Tantra actively brings every aspect of life and death into the path of practice: the use of imagery which would normally be considered disgusting, expands our capacity to accomplish this. I often take a good long sniff from the barrel of my kangling, to remind me of what I'm going to smell like myself someday soon.

### **TSOG CYMBALS** (Tib: TINGSHAR).

Tsog is not so much a ritual meal as the rite of dedicating the act of eating. It authenticates the food as a manifestation of the fundamental nature of everything, Chö (Dharma). It makes a connection with all beings, including normally invisible beings, who may be attracted to spiritual practice that is going on.

It especially emphasises the relationship with the Lama, and one's fellow practitioners. Because it re-asserts those connections, it is a rite that is often performed to repair broken spiritual vows. As part of an event where major empowerments are being given, a Tsog may last for half a day, a whole day, even three days.

Ordinary meals are taken during this time, and the specially blessed food is eaten and given away at the end. But like most Tibetan rituals, Tsog can also be performed in a highly essentialised form, as brief as a single word, so every meal can be Tsog. We use this exclamation "A LA LA HO!" (which means 'wonderful'), meaning that Chö is wonderfully performing itself in manifesting this food.

In its brief, or extended forms, at certain points in the rite, the tingshar may be sounded. For instance, they may be played eight times, to summon the eight classes of 'guest', the beings who are invited to come and enjoy the feast.

The tingshar are also used in making an offering to the 'hungry ghosts'. These are most unfortunate beings, traditionally depicted with huge stomachs and reed-like necks, so that they are permanently needy and greedy, but cannot get the food down. Their mode of Karmic perception is such that they cannot stomach pure, clean, original, wholesome, life-enhancing food. They only recognise it as food when it has been mucked about, degraded and denatured. Even then, the food busts into flames in their gullets. They have to live on the smell of it alone. The offering to the hungry ghosts has to be made on some nasty, chipped remnant of old pottery, and left outside by the drains, or worse. We have a joke that this is the offering 'to the intellectuals'.

The sound of the tingshar is meant to open the doors to the dimensions in



which other kinds of beings may live. When many people are practising together, it is very easy to experience the sound as attenuating the ordinary boundaries of perception, and dissolving one's substantial body. But to have an experience of that, it is necessary to get hold of a good pair of tingshar.

You can pay hundreds of pounds for a truly fabulous old pair, if you can find them, but this is one item that modern metalworkers regularly make for a few pounds, to a higher standard than many antiques on the market. Avoid the ones that are encrusted with designs; they are strictly for tourists. They should be dead plain, or maybe with a few Tibetan syllables incised on the underside, no more.

Test them by hitting the edges hard together at ninety degrees to each other; then damp them alternately on your arm so that you can hear each one on its own. Where there is a great pile of identical-looking ones on sale, you may be able to swap them around until you get two you are really happy with.

Then keep them in a little bag, padded so that they cannot clink against each other. Don't use them for any casual purpose, or for starting or ending meditation sessions. Sounding the tingshar without making any offering is like ringing someone's doorbell and running away.

Do that often enough and they are going to get cross. Even when I am testing them in a shop I whisper a little mantra to make an offering of the teachings.



*Ngakpa Rig'dzin Dorje was born in 1954 and lives in London with his wife, Nicola. For the past ten years he has been studying with his root teacher, Ven. Ngakpa Chögyam Rinpoche. Both lamas are British and teach internationally. They represent the non-monastic tradition, the white, or Ngakphang Sangha, of the Nyingma school, the oldest stratum of Tibetan Buddhism. Their own sangha, the Mother-Essence Lineage is a thousand-year tradition that has been passed down, perhaps uniquely, by female Buddhas. For more information visit [www.aroter.org](http://www.aroter.org)*

**NOTES:**

1. The Heart Sutra is one of a collection called the Prajnaparamita Sutras.
2. But by convention, men and women hold their instruments in the same hands, to

reflect the over-arching symbolism.

3. Three of Sutra, three of outer Tantra, three of inner Tantra.

4. Exceptionally, in my own tradition, the Mother-Essence Lineage, the Chod drum is used to accompany a wide variety of practice of Yogic Song. This is because it was the only drum possessed by two former Lineage Lamas, yogis, who were husband and wife, while they were in a long retreat together. Practices using the Chod drum entered the Lineage from visions they received in retreat.

