

# Chod in Limitless-Oneness

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# Chod in Limitless-Oneness

Dr. Yutang Lin

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Thangka of Machig Labdron

# Praise to Ma Machig

Tantric Disciple Yutang Lin

*Cutting through attachment to body to offer  
compassionate sacrifice,*

*In wondrous application of wisdom and compassion  
all things unite.*

*Intangible non-self, though hard to grasp, is given a  
practical shortcut.*

*Originating a Tantric path to feed back India, none  
other than Machig!*

Comment:

Tibetan lady patriarch Machig Labdron originated the tantric practice of Chod, and thereby enabled the practice and attainment of intangible non-self through cutting down the attachment to body. (See my work, "Chod in Limitless-Oneness.") This is the only tantric Buddhist practice that was originated in Tibet, widely spread to neighboring regions, and even fed back to India. From her profound wisdom was revealed the teaching that, while cutting through the root of self-grasping, the attachment to body, it can be simultaneously utilized as a compassionate and universal offering so as to achieve paying off of karmic debts, accumulation of merits and cultivation of compassion. Such wondrous application of unified wisdom and compassion is fully integrated in this practice. Consequently, the practitioners can rely solely

on cultivation of Chod practice to gradually realize the Dharmakaya. Magnificent indeed, the skillful wisdom of Ma Machig!

Written in Chinese on April 4, 2001

Translated on April 5, 2001

El Cerrito, California

# Preface

Chod, meaning cutting through, is a Buddhist tantric practice. In Tibetan Buddhist Tantra it is taught to beginners for accumulation of merits; it is also practiced by ardent devotees for realization of Dharmakaya—the pinnacle of Buddhist realization. How could one practice be so common and yet profound? Its original teacher, Machig Labdron (1055-1153), was a Tibetan lay lady, a very rare phenomenon in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and for generations up until now, her serious followers are mostly wondering beggars and yogis. Chod as formulated by Machig Labdron is the only Buddhist tantric practice that originated in Tibet, instead of India, and then spread to its neighboring regions, including India. The combination of these factors certainly renders Chod unique and intriguing. This practice involves visualization of cutting and offering the body, and hence may seem barbaric or gruesome from the ordinary point of view. How could such a practice be related to the cultivation of wisdom and compassion?

The fact that Chod is a practice for both beginners and advanced yogis drew my interest in writing the present exposition. For the general public who are intrigued by the mysterious aspects of this practice and its lineage, an explanation in layman's terms will be offered, and some related topics will be discussed. For serious Buddhist practitioners the philosophical significance involved in this practice will be brought to light. In particular, the significance of Chod in the light of Limitless-Oneness

will be explained. This is completely in accordance with the spirit of Chod, as it was labeled by Machig Labdron to be the Chod of Mahamudra.

Yogi Chen, my late Guru, taught me how to practice the Chod ritual written in Chinese by him. I was very impressed by the profound meaning and open perspective conveyed through the ritual text. Now that I am writing on Chod, I take the opportunity to introduce it to readers who do not read Chinese. My translation of the ritual is included in this work as an independent chapter. My sincere thanks to Stanley Lam and Chen-Jer Jan for the corrections, improvements and suggestions they made to this translation.

In 1955, with the help of an interpreter, Yogi Chen translated from Tibetan into Chinese a version of An Exposition of Transforming the Aggregates into an Offering of Food, Illuminating the Meaning of Chod. This book was printed in 1983 for free distribution. Now it has been revised by me and included in Volume 17 of The Complete Works of Yogi Chen. The Chinese titles of these two works are listed in the References at the end of this book.

During the course of my preparation for this work I have received teachings in a dream that Chod is not only an antidote to attachment to body but also one to all five poisons, i.e., greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. Again, in a dream state I saw a curved knife cutting through my joints and brought relaxation to those areas; thus I was blessed with and taught about the

releasing effect of Chod.

Furthermore, one day as I slept I saw the following Chinese Characters:

元鈴

將此譜傳下去

The word 元(yuan) means the origin, and the word 鈴(ling) means bell. In the tradition of Chod there are eight pairs of teachings and lineages, hence I interpret the character formed by two 元, which does not exist in Chinese, to signify the origin of all these pairs of traditions, and in tantric context the bell refers to the Vajra Bell which represents the Dakinis. Therefore, this phrase denotes the Founder Dakini, Machig Labdron. The second set of characters forms an imperative sentence, commanding: Pass down this record! The character 譜(pu) is usually employed to denote a lineage record. Hence in this context the meaning is clearly: Pass down this lineage (record)! To me, this is a clear sign of approval from the Great Mother, Machig Labdron.

I am grateful for all the teachings and blessings, including those not mentioned here, that have been bestowed on me for my humble service to the glorious tradition of Chod.

No matter how marvelous a practice is, if one does not have the determination to adopt it as a regular activity



and persist in learning through it, there would be no significant results whatsoever. I hope that this work of mine would have illustrated the wondrous aspects and functions of Chod, and provided enough clarification to motivate and improve its practice. May readers of this work gain real and ultimate benefits of Chod through regular and persistent practice!

Thanks to comments from Chen-Jer Jan I have added some clarifications to this book. I am also grateful to Stanley Lam for formatting the entire book for publication.

Yutang Lin

July 6, 1996

A Study for the Cultivation of Harmony

El Cerrito, California

# I. General Introduction

## 1. The Body and Spiritual Quests

The condition of one's body is a major factor of one's enjoyment or suffering in life; and one's existence is usually understood to be determined by the subsistence of one's physical life. Consequently, preservation of our physical existence and promotion of our physical well-being is at the heart of most human endeavors. From such motives and activities it is inevitable that self-centered prejudices and selfish practices become dominant and customary.

Since our physical existence and well-being is dependent upon many factors, and many conditions in life, of natural or human origin, are beyond human control, suffering and death are lurking like traps and land-mines. Suffering in our lives is further compounded by everyone's self-centered prejudices and selfish practices. In order to promote selfish interests people often go to the extent of ignoring or sacrificing others. Wars and fighting are waged at almost every corner and every level of human existence.

To free us from such seemingly insoluble miseries the fundamental approach is to learn about and practice freedom from self-centeredness. Only then can we see clearly that living in the spirit of cooperation and empathy is a far more sensible approach to life. To become free from self-centeredness our preoccupation

with the body and its well-being need to be reexamined and readjusted in an all-round view of life. As a result of such reflections, many spiritual practices consider a simple way of life as a prerequisite.

In addition to our physical conditions, our spirituality is also a major factor of the quality of our lives. No one can be happy without harmony between physical and mental states. The growth of one's spirituality is intimately connected with how one faces and utilizes one's mental states as well as one's physical situations. Goals of spiritual quests usually involve unity of the mind and the body and transcendence of the physical existence. Transcendence in spirituality will be achieved only after one's mentality is no longer bound by one's physical conditions and environment.

Due to the intimate connection between the physical and spiritual aspects of one's life, spiritual practices often involve physical training. Most of these consist of posture, breathing and simple maneuvers. There are also yogic exercises that are very difficult, and it often takes years of training to attain such performance. To transcend considerations originating from the root of one's physical existence, the body, there are ascetic practices that punish the body to achieve self-mortification or self-denial. Self-sacrifice of the body through offering of physical or sexual services, or even donation of organs, is also sometimes used as a spiritual practice. Practices involving punishment or self-sacrifice of the body are rarely adopted, and due to their extreme nature may lead to unintended

consequences.

## 2. Buddhist Teachings Related to the Body

On one hand, Buddhist teachings point out that attachment to the body and identification with one's physical existence is the main source of suffering, while on the other hand, respect for life is also clearly taught by stipulating no-killing as one of the five basic rules of conduct. The Buddhist teaching emphasizes no killing of born and unborn lives of human beings as well as of other sentient beings. A popular Buddhist practice is to save endangered lives such as birds, fish and animals in captivity and release them back to nature.

Respect for life and recognizing the body as the root of suffering are not contradictory. Destroying the body and putting an end to this life would not resolve the misery of conditional existence because the consciousness of a sentient being will continue to transmigrate in the cycle of endless living and dying as long as grasping to the notion of a self lingers. Killing of others or oneself will in itself become a major cause leading to more suffering in this and future lives. The body can also serve as an instrument for attaining the liberation of oneself and others from transmigration. The key to transforming the status of the body from the root of suffering to an instrument for liberation lies in one's ability to recognize and renounce one's blind and blinding attachment to the body as the embodiment of the self which is illusive and unattainable upon philosophical analyses.

Buddhists do use medicine to heal themselves of diseases, do clean their bodies, houses and gardens, and in so doing killing of micro-bacteria, insects and mice is often inevitable. Are Buddhists hypocritical in accepting no-killing as a basic rule of conduct? These kinds of activities, although involving killing of sentient beings, are aiming at the protection of human lives without a malice to kill other beings. Before such actions are taken a Buddhist would try with every effort to avoid killing unnecessarily and look for alternatives. When such killing is unavoidable, it is done with repentance and prayer for a better rebirth for the victims.

As recorded in biographies, some advanced Buddhist practitioners would sacrifice their bodies willingly to feed hungry mosquitoes or even tigers. When Sakyamuni Buddha in one of his previous lives offered his only possession, his body, to a hungry tiger he did not intend to commit suicide but simply to alleviate the tiger's hunger. Thus it is clear that the teachings of no-killing and compassion for all beings are taken seriously by Buddhists. The extent to which one is able to harmonize such a rule of conduct and the ideal of compassion for all beings varies with individual efforts and devotion.

The discussion presented in the last two paragraphs clearly demonstrates that a practitioner's intention may be simple but due to the circumstances his practice may become a complicated matter from various points of view. Putting Buddhist teachings into practice in real-life situations is therefore not a easy matter. My

humble opinion is that a Buddhist practitioner should maintain a pure motivation, aiming at the Enlightenment of all beings, and learn how to practice in daily life through experiences. Just as a Chinese proverb says, "As one grows older, one keeps on learning more." (活到老，學到老。)

Buddha taught the middle way which points out that neither asceticism nor hedonism is the right path toward liberation. He used the analogy of a stringed instrument which can produce melodies only when the strings are neither too tight nor too loose. Hence, the body as an instrument for achieving liberation from transmigration should be properly taken care of. However, as an antidote to past indulgent behavior patterns or as a horsewhip to push forward one's spiritual endeavor, ascetic practices are sometimes adopted by some devoted and diligent Buddhist practitioners.

In Asian Buddhist countries some monks or nuns would undertake the ritual of Burned Scars of Sila Commitment. By enduring small piles of incense burned on top of one's shaven head or arm, permanent scars are left as a sign of one's devotion and vows. Some would even burn one or more fingers over candle flames as offering to Buddha. Although these are practices adopted by Buddhists, they lack proper Buddhist explanation and origin. It is said that the custom of Burned Scars of Sila Commitment was initiated in China by the government of Tang Dynasty to prevent criminal fugitives from posing as monks and hiding in

monasteries.

In tantric Buddhism it is emphasized that the body is the residence of Buddhas and the very instrument through which to attain Buddhahood. Hence, one of the fundamental rules of conduct for tantric practitioners is not to have disregard for the body. This is not the same as cultivating attachment to the body. The usual attachment to the body is due to grasping of a self and its subsistence. The tantric teaching on proper caring of the body is with the understanding that self is an illusion and that with proper training the body may help one to realize the selfless nature of all phenomena.

Many Buddhist teachings center around the body. The practice of chanting a list of thirty-six impurities, referring to all the various parts of the body, aims at reminding oneself of the body as a collection of undesirables. Observation and visualization of the various stages of a decaying corpse is a practice both for reminding oneself of impermanence and for reducing one's unreflective attachment to sensual objects. Visualization of a skeleton is a practice for purifying one's greed. Being mindful of one's sensations, feelings, breathing and action is also taught as meditation practices. To advance on the Bodhisattva Path almsgiving of wealth, services, knowledge, teachings, and even bodily parts are encouraged. In tantric Buddhism a Yidam body is maintained in visualization instead of one's physical body. Chod, the main topic of this work, is a tantric practice which involves visualization of the offering of the body. In highly

advanced tantric practices sexual activities are employed to experience the selfless nature of ecstasy which is free from the stains of jealousy, obsession, possessiveness, greed, attachment, envy, etc.

It is interesting to note that among Buddhist teachings which revolve around the body, there are various attitudes toward the body. Some consider it as an object of impurity, some the root of self-centeredness, some an object of fundamental attachment, some an object for the practice of mindfulness, some an object for the practice of almsgiving and offering, some an object to be meditated away in Sunyata, some an instrument for enlightened experiences, and some the abode of Buddhas. This illustrates the relative nature both of the functionality of the body and of the Buddhist teachings revolve around it. All these views, teachings, functions and practices may coexist in harmony as long as their respective functions in guiding toward Enlightenment are thoroughly understood and adopted accordingly.



## II. Chod— the Tantric Practice of Cutting through Attachment

Chod, meaning cutting through, is a Buddhist Tantric practice. Although it is rooted in Buddhist teachings transmitted from India, its main features were molded by the Tibetan Yogini Machig Labdron (1055-1153) based on her insight and spiritual experiences. On the transcendental and supernatural level, she received blessings directly from the primordial enlightened mind manifesting as holy beings to originate these tantric teachings for the salvation of all beings. Although India is the birth place of Buddhist teachings, Chod stands out as the only teaching that was molded anew in Tibet and then spread to its neighboring areas including India. It has been a wide-spread practice adopted by monks, nuns and laity alike, especially by devout beggars and wandering yogis who travel from cemeteries to desolate places and never stay at one place for more than seven days. Many systematic and unique teachings on Chod, complete with rituals, precepts, visualizations, and instructions about stages of realizations are well-preserved by many lineages up to this day. For details on its history, lineage and spreading, please refer to Jerome Edou's book listed in the References.

# 1. A General Characterization of Chod

Recognizing the body as the root of one's attachment to self, Machig Labdron formulated Chod to be a practice that would destroy this fundamental attachment and simultaneously develop compassion for all beings. The main part of a Chod practice can be outlined as follows:

*A. Transfer one's consciousness into space and identify it with the black Vajra Yogini.*

*B. Through visualization, identify the body with the universe and then offer it completely to all beings who would want them, especially one's creditors, enemies, and evil beings.*

For details, please refer to Chapter III below for an example of a Chod ritual.

To handle worldly or spiritual problems there are many types of approaches. Some try to dissolve the problems, some plan to escape from the problems, some attempt to stay at a safe distance and tackle through theoretical discussions, and some would face the problems and work on them. When one is not ready to handle the problems, the first three types of approaches are temporarily appropriate; nevertheless, the ultimate test of a solution lies with the head-on approach.

Chod is obviously a head-on approach to the spiritual problem of subconscious attachment. It also exemplifies the ultimate wisdom of facing the reality to realize its conditional nature instead of being satisfied with merely conceptual understanding. Chod is learning through

enacting. One's attachment to the body, fear of its destruction, greed for its well-being, and displeasure for its suffering are all put to test in a Chod practice. When all these subconscious mental entanglements are brought to light through the visualization of dismemberment, one is really fighting with one's self. No one who cannot pass the test of such visualizations would have a chance of achieving liberation under real-life circumstances.

Advanced Chodpas (practitioners of Chod) do not satisfy themselves with just the ritual practices. They often stay in cemeteries, desolate places, and haunted houses in order to face the fearful situations and experience the interference from desperate or evil spirits. By developing compassion for all beings, including those trying to scare or harm them, by sharpening wisdom through realizing the non-substantial nature of fearful phenomena and fear itself, and by deepening meditation stability through tolerating fearful situations, Chodpas gradually achieve transcendence over attachments, fear, greed, and anger. Through the hardship of direct confrontation they advance, step by step, on the path toward Enlightenment.

The separation of the consciousness from the body indicates the mistake of identifying with the body. It is the aboard of this life; both this life and its aboard are transient and cannot be grasped for good. The identification of the consciousness with the black Vajra Yogini signifies the recognition of the wisdom of non-self. On one hand, the black Vajra Yogini is a

manifestation of the primordial wisdom of non-self; and on the other hand, due to the non-self nature of both the consciousness and the Yogini, they may be identified. Furthermore, the identification with the black Vajra Yogini, as it is the case in all tantric identification with a Yidam, is not grasping to a certain image but involves salvation activities. In other words, it is a dynamic approach to personality changes.

On the surface Chod seems to be an offering of only the body. Nevertheless, during the visualization the body has been identified with the universe, and consequently the offering means the offering of all things desirable. Thus, Chod is not just aiming at reduction of attachment to the body but also of all attachments. In terms of the traditional tantric classification of four levels, Chod could be characterized as a practice which frees one: outwardly from attachments to the body; inwardly, to sensual objects; secretly, to all desires and enjoyments; and most secretly, to self-centeredness. A Chodpa would gradually experience the transforming effects of Chod practices and become aware of its ever deeper penetration into the subtle and elusive core of one's attachments.

## 2. The Essential Ingredients of Chod

Chod as a tantric practice consists of the following essential ingredients:

### A. The Blessing of the Lineage

In Tantric Buddhism lineage, meaning an unbroken line of proper transmissions of the teachings, is essential to practice and realization. This is because what is transmitted is not just the words but something spiritual and special. Through proper transmissions the blessings of all the generations of teachers are bestowed on the disciples. Without such blessings no one can even enter the invisible gate of Tantra. Tantric practices without the blessing of lineage may be likened to automobiles out of gas.

In Tantric Buddhism lineage is always emphasized and the teachers are revered as the root of blessings. In Sutra-yanas the importance of lineage is often overlooked by scholars who lack interest in practice and ordinary Buddhist followers. This is probably the main reason why in Tantric Buddhism blessings can often be directly sensed by practitioners while in Sutra-yanas such experiences are less frequently encountered.

All tantric practices derive their special effectiveness from the blessing that is transmitted through the lineage. In the case of Chod, the blessing from Machig Labdron is the source of such blessings. All other teachers that form the various lineages of Chod are also indispensable to the continuation of these lineages; without their accomplishments and devoted services to the Dharma, the teachings would not be still available today. Therefore, we should remember their grace and always hold them in reverence.

To a practitioner who is fortunate enough to have

received the blessings of a lineage, the meaning of lineage becomes his devotion, with all his heart and soul, to carry on, to preserve and transmit the teachings for all generations (of disciples, the real beneficiaries,) to come.

## B. The Wisdom of Recognition and Transformation

Self-clinging is the fundamental hindrance to Enlightenment and the fundamental cause of transmigration in samsara. Although it is the main obstacle for a Buddhist practitioner to eradicate, its subtle nature and elusive ways are beyond easy comprehension. Even the very attempt to attack or reduce self-clinging might very well be indeed an expression of egocentrism, if the motive is limited to self-interest. Facing the dilemma of an invisible enemy who is possibly lurking behind one's every move, it amounts to an almost impossible task! Thanks to the wisdom insight of Machig Labdron, the root of self-clinging has been singled out to be the body. Once this is made clear, and the body being a concrete object, the remaining task is much simpler, though not easier.

According to the wisdom insight of Machig Labdron, the real demons are everything that hinders the attainment of liberation. Keeping this wisdom insight in mind, on one hand, all judgments based on personal preferences and interests should be given up, and on the other hand, all obstacles and adversaries could be transformed by one's efforts into helping hands on the path toward liberation. For example, a gain could be a

hindrance to liberation if one is attached to it, while an injury could be a help to liberation if one uses it to practice tolerance, forgiveness and compassion.

Applying this wisdom insight to the root of self-clinging, the body, Machig Labdron formulated the visualization of Chod, and thereby transformed the root of hindrance into the tool for attaining compassion and liberation.

## C. Impermanence and Complete Renunciation

The body is the very foundation of our physical existence. Even after it has been recognized to be the root of self-clinging, it is still very difficult to see how to treat it to bring about spiritual transcendence and liberation. Destroying the body would certainly end the possibility of further spiritual advancement in this life but not necessarily the self-clinging. The fact that beings are transmigrating from life to life attests to this. Ascetic practices may temporarily check the grip of physical desires over spiritual clarity and purity, but transcendence depending on physical abuse can hardly be accepted as genuine liberation. The Buddha had clearly taught that the right path is the middle one away from the extremes of asceticism and hedonism.

A fundamental and common approach of Buddhist teachings is to remind everyone of the fact of Impermanence. All things are in constant changes, even though some changes are not readily recognizable. The change from being alive to dead could occur at any moment and could happen in just an instant. Keeping

impermanence in mind, one can clearly see that all our attachments to the body are based primarily on wishful thinking. To be ready for and able to transcend the events of life and death one needs to see in advance that all worldly possessions, including the body, will be lost sooner or later. Hence, a determination to renounce all worldly possessions is the first step toward spiritual awakening and liberation. Chod as a Buddhist practice is also based on such awareness of impermanence and complete renunciation. In fact, many Chodpas adopt not just the ritual practice but also a way of life that exemplifies such awakening. Many Chodpas are devout beggars or wondering yogis who stay only in cemeteries or desolate places and do not stay in one place for more than seven consecutive days.

The offering of the body through visualization in a Chod ritual is an ingenious way to counter our usual attitude toward the body; instead of possession, attachment, and tender, loving care, the ritual offers new perspectives as to what could happen to the body as a physical object and thereby reduces the practitioners' fixation with the body, enlarge their perspectives, and help them to appreciate the position of the body on the cosmic scale. Chodpas would fully realize that the body is also impermanent, become free from attachment to it, and ready to renounce it when the time comes. When one is ready to renounce even the body, the rest of the worldly possessions and affairs are no longer of vital concern, only then can one make steadfast advancement on the quest for Enlightenment.



## D. Bodhicitta

Machig Labdron emphasizes that the offering of the body in Chod practice is an act of great compassion for all beings, especially toward the practitioner's creditors and enemies. Great compassion knows no partiality, hence the distinction of friends and foes, or relatives and strangers does not apply. Great compassion transcends all attachments to the self, hence all one's possessions, including the body, may be offered to benefit others. In every act of visualized offering of the bodily parts, the practitioner is converting an unquestioned attachment into an awakened determination to sacrifice the self for the benefit of all. In short, this is the ultimate exercise in contemplating complete self-sacrifice for achieving an altruistic goal.

Chod is a practice that kills two birds with one stone. On one hand, the attachment to the body and self would be reduced through the visualized activity of dismemberment; on the other hand, the visualized practice of satisfying all beings, especially one's creditors and enemies, through the ultimate and complete sacrifice of one's body would nurture one's great compassion. When the attachment is weakened, the wisdom of non-self would gradually reveal itself. Consequently, Chod develops wisdom and compassion simultaneously in one practice; or to put it in another way, Chod is a practice that nurtures the unification of wisdom and compassion.

In Buddhism "Bodhicitta" refers to the ultimate

unification of wisdom and compassion, the Enlightenment, and to the aspiration of achieving it. Therefore, we may say that Chod stems from the Bodhicitta of Machig Labdron, guides practitioners who are with Bodhicitta through the enactment of Bodhicitta, and would mature them for the attainment of Bodhicitta.

Only when one is completely devoted to the service of all sentient beings can one gain complete liberation from self-centeredness. Just as a headlong plunge takes a diver off the board, complete devotion to Dharma and complete attainment of liberation happens simultaneously. Only when considerations involving oneself is eradicated, will an act in the name of the Dharma become indeed an act of Bodhicitta, of Enlightenment. Developing Bodhicitta in place of self-centeredness is the effective and indispensable approach to liberation from self, and Chod is the epitome of this approach.

## E. Meditation Stability and Visualization

The visualization practice of Chod is not an act of imagination. Were it just imagining things in one's mind, there is no guarantee that such practice would not drive one insane. To practice Chod properly one should have some attainment of meditation stability so that the visualizations are focused and not mixed with delusive and scattered thoughts or mental images. Indeed, Chod should be practiced as akin to meditation in action.

To be free from attachments to the body, we have seen

above that destroying or abusing it would not do. It is the great ingenuity of Machig Labdron to recognize that attachments being mental tendencies can be properly corrected by mental adjustments. Visualizations performed by practitioners with meditation stability could have the same or even stronger effects as real occurrences. Furthermore, visualizations can be repeated over and over again to gradually overcome propensities until their extinction.

Using visualization in Chod practices the body remains intact and serves as a good foundation for the practitioner's advancement on the path to Enlightenment, while the attachment to the body and all attachments stemming from it are being chopped down piece by piece.

Visualizations performed in meditation stability is a valid way of communication with the consciousness of beings who are without corporeal existence. Hence Chod visualizations as performed by adepts are real encounters of the supernatural kind. They could yield miraculous results such as healing of certain ailments or mental disorders that are caused by ghosts or evil spirits, and exorcism that restores peace to a haunted place.

The five essential ingredients as stated and explained above constitute the key to the formulation of Chod as a Buddhist tantric practice. A thorough understanding of the significance of these essentials is both a prerequisite to and a fruit of successful Chod practices.

### 3. The Benefits of Chod Practice

Enlightenment is of course the ultimate goal of Chod practice. Machig Labdron revealed her vast spiritual experiences by indicating signs of various stages of realization in Chod. These teachings are still well preserved in Chod traditions. Through the References listed at the end of this work serious readers may find some of these teachings.

In addition to the fruits of realization as indicated above and the application of spiritual power to healing and exorcism as mentioned earlier, there are other benefits that may be derived from Chod practice. Chod practice can help booster the courage and determination to devote one's whole being to practice, beyond considerations of physical well-being and life, thereby achieving complete renunciation and significant realization. Chod practice could help total removal of subconscious hindrances that are most difficult to become aware of because these would surface only when challenged by grave situations like dismemberment.

In a dream state I sensed the relaxing effect of Chod; those joints of my body that were tense became relaxed when a curved knife cut through them. The tension in our mind is enhanced by our underlying concept of the body. By removing the mental image of the body through Chod the tension is reduced. The natural state of one's body exists before the arising of concepts, and hence, to return to it one needs to transcend the grip of

conceptuality.

Many kinds of death are horrible to normal thinking; through practicing Chod it is possible to go beyond attachment to physical existence, and have enough spiritual experiences to understand that whatever the manner of death may be they are just different ways to exit from the physical existence. Such a broad perspective would enable one to remain serene in facing unthinkable tragedies. Such an understanding would make it easier to tolerate, forgive and forgo vengeance.

## 4. Dispelling Misconceptions about Chod

A fundamental rule of conduct of tantric Buddhism is the proper caring of, though not attachment to, the body. In tantric Buddhism the ritual of Burned Scars of Sila Commitment and the offering of burned fingers are not practiced. Most tantric practices transfer one's preoccupation with the body by visualization of the wisdom body of one's Yidam. In Chod the visualization and identification with the black Vajra Yogini is important, but emphasis is on the visualization of cutting and offering the body. The dismemberment is done in visualization only, hence there is no infringement of the rule of conduct.

In tantric practices the body is usually "meditated away" by returning it in visualization to its empty nature of formlessness. Chod differs from the rest by cutting it away for the compassionate cause of satisfying others' needs. Chod should not therefore be considered as a

practice contrary to the rest. As far as the body is concerned, either approach depends on and makes use of the conditional nature of the body.

The activities visualized in Chod may seem like outbursts of anger, hatred or other negative mentalities or barbaric drives. Indeed the dismemberment visualized in Chod is not intended as a redirection or outlet for any negative impulse or drive. Nor would it result in habitual actions that are negative or barbaric because the visualizations are clearly understood to be born of compassion and there is no bodily enactment that imitates the visualizations. To a Chodpa these visualized activities represent determinations to destroy the illusion of a permanent body which exists in concepts only. In the motivation of Chod there is not even the faintest trace of a wanton disregard for life and the body. The coolness to see and use the body as an object without reference to self is a display of wisdom, while the intention to satisfy all others' needs is born of great compassion. We should not commit the fallacy of deducing intention from behavior because similar behaviors may have originated from diverse motives. Nor should we be confined by considerations involving appearances into submission to the tyranny of taboos; the liberation of employing whatever means that seems appropriate is a true mark of wisdom.

The dismemberment visualizations of Chod are opposite to morbid obsession with cruelty, sadism, self-mortification, masochism and suicidal mania. Obsession with cruelty, sadism, self-mortification,

masochism and suicidal mania are results of self-centeredness or its consequential inability to appreciate the vast openness of the world and what life could offer for the better. Chod works directly toward the reduction of self-centeredness. Chod and the rest may appear to have similar elements, but they are squarely opposite in motivation, mentality during practice, and the consequential results.

The dismemberment visualizations would seem gruesome from an ordinary point of view; however, from the point of view of things as they are and life as it is, there is nothing frightful in what could have happened, nor in what had happened. It is very important to appreciate the openness of mind that Chod visualizations may lead to. In this respect Chod may be compared to inoculation.

The black Wisdom Yogini is a manifestation of the wisdom of selflessness. Her appearance may seem peculiar to people who have not been initiated into her secret teachings, but the reader should be assured that every aspect of her appearance signifies a certain aspect of the wisdom and compassion of Enlightenment. This remark is to dispel shallow mislabeling of Chod as a kind of demonic worship.

Actually none of the misunderstandings discussed above would occur to a Buddhist practitioner who has undergone the preliminary practices and possesses a proper understanding of the philosophy and significance of Chod. However, such misunderstandings would

readily occur to most people who happens to come across Chod rituals. Therefore, I think it advantageous to bring them out for discussion so that they would be put to rest once for all.

Chod is an antidote to grasping of the body and the self, but not a method to increase antagonism. The basic spirit of Chod is not to destroy, conquer or become an enemy of creditors, evil spirits, etc. Its essence is self-sacrifice out of compassion and wisdom. Chod is an antidotal practice; a Chodpa should not thereby become over concerned with the body in the opposite direction, e. g., feeling aversion toward the body. The ideal result should be freedom from preoccupation with the body and the self.

Chod is an extreme practice. It is not the only path toward liberation from self, but it is a valid path toward liberation. Without such understanding one's knowledge of what it means to be liberated from the self is incomplete and possibly erroneous.



# III. Yogi Chen's Ritual of Chod

The Sadhana of Almsgiving the Body to Dispel  
Demonic Hindrance, Karmic Creditors, Attachment  
to Self and the Concept of the Body

written in Chinese by  
the Buddhist Yogi C. M. Chen  
translated by his disciple  
Dr. Yutang Lin

## 1. Brief Introduction

From Lama Gensang Zecheng I received "Great Perfection Pinnacle Wisdom," and from Dharma teacher Rev. Yan Ding I received the oral instruction on the text and commentary of the preliminary practice of this practice, which I had written down. The Gushali (Kusali) Accumulation, i.e., the practice of almsgiving of the body, contained therein consists of only eighteen sentences. The supreme practice of this method belongs to the Jiulangba (Chodpa) Lineage which has been transmitted from Maji Nozhun (Machig Labdron; the transliteration is in accordance with Guru Chen's pronunciation) down to the present day. The practitioners of this lineage do not practice other sadhanas but concentrate on this practice, and many attained realizations. This practice can dispel the concept of the body, cut through the attachment to self, and ward off hindrance caused by Karmic creditors, thereby enabling a straightforward advancement on the Great Path toward Bodhi. I searched for this teaching, but due to the absence of an Tibetan-Chinese interpreter,

I failed to translate the root tantra of this teaching. Consequently, based on the eighteen sentences on Gushali which constitute one of the six preliminary practices of Great Perfection, I expand the sequence and write down this work.

## 2. Main Text

### (1) Motivation

*May all sentient beings, who are limitless, like space, in number and are like mother to me, possess pure and joyful body, and the causes resulting in such a body!*

*May all sentient beings, who are limitless, like space, in number and are like mother to me, be free from impure and tormenting body, and the causes resulting in such a body!*

*May all sentient beings, who are limitless, like space, in number and are like mother to me, be inseparable from Great Pleasure Wisdom Non-death Rainbow Body!*

*May all sentient beings, who are limitless, like space, in number and are like mother to me, stay far away from distinguishing friends and foes, relatives and enemies, and abide in the equanimity of the Great Essential Body!*

### (2) Contemplation on Impermanence

Visualize that all Karmic creditors, from present and past lives, of oneself and others in the cemetery, appear and gather in front, simultaneously become keenly aware of impermanence, and preach Dharma to them. Then recite the following stanza with the accompaniment of bell and drum, chanting in a slow tempo.

*All those present and gather here have a sorrowful body;*

*Our sufferings are rooted in dependence on the body.*

*All things are originally pure, without a polluted body;*

*Defilement is piled up by one owing to this ignorance.*

*Possessing an impure body causes grasping of it as a castle of self;*

*Benefiting oneself and annoying others, all faults are thus accomplished.*

*Mind having grasped at this body, the body is no longer light;*

*Piling layers upon layers of impurity, the coarse five elements are formed.*

*Coarse wind drifts and flows, with ignorance riding on this trend;*

*Like a horse out of control, the five poisons are ever winding.*

*The body leads to greedy love, such love leads to seven sorts of emotions;*

*The body leads to ignorance or anger, these are also causes for downfall.*

*Killing and Robbing are mainly committed by hand, leading to sexual misconduct are the eyes;*

*How many sinful deeds are committed by voice from the mouth!*

*Empty stomach and dried intestines, frostbite and cracked skin,*

*Unbearable hunger and cold are followed by misdeeds.*

*Eating salty dried animal corpse, wearing materials woven by silkworms,*

*Trampling on insects while walking, how many lives have we damaged?*

*When heavy and coarse five poisons pervade, anger and killing cause the downfall into hell;*

*The body will be broken into pieces and then revive instantly to repeat the punishment, no break for such sins!*

*Leprosy and cholera are born from greed in food and sex;*

*Crippled legs, cramped hands and venereal diseases may thus gather in the body.*

*Followers of other religions practice with attachment to the body, and hence cannot transcend samsara;*

*The wrong view of a self leads to ascetic practice of vainly covering the body with ashes.*

*Variation in Karma of the three realms is dependent on the coarseness of their bodies;*

*Formless realm is free from the body and yet still bound by the confines of space.*

*To pursue clothing and food for the body, family members fight against one another;*

*Distinguishing friends and foes, families and countries, the world is full of wars.*

*Heavenly bodies suffer five defects, human beings may*

*die young suddenly;  
Having tiny neck but huge stomach, hungry ghosts are  
even more pitiful.  
The strong preying on the weak, bows and arrows, nets  
and traps,  
Knives and cutting boards, pans and pots, the sorrow  
of animal bodies are multiple.  
Eight freezing and eight sizzling hells, lasting for  
many kalpas,  
Suffering without a break, the body is restored as soon  
as it is in pieces!  
Sinful deeds are committed by the body, consequences  
are also received by the body;  
In transmigration beings are preying on others who  
were their children in past lives, without realizing this  
fact.  
Just considering the debts and hostility of this life,  
when can they be paid off?  
Understanding that the grasping mind is without  
substance, we attain equanimity.*

### **(3) Visualization of Impure and Pure Bodies**

Visualize in the impure body a white wisdom drop, the size of a pea, situated within the medium channel at the center of the heart chakra. This wisdom drop gathers all wisdom wind and the pure six elements—the constituents of all Buddha bodies, the essence of life and merits without remains; the rest of the body is impure. Yell "Pei" (Phat) once to eject this wisdom drop upward through the Gate of Rebirth in Pureland at the top of the head. Visualize that this wisdom drop

transforms into the black Hai Mu (Dorje Pagmo) whose appearance is just as described in the Sadhana of Hai Mu.

Abide in the Samadhi of All-in-One, a Hua-Yen (Avatamsaka) Mystic Gate, and visualize that the sinful Karma, sickness, hindrance, and evil disturbance of all sentient beings in the three realms are gathering into the impure body left below. All beings, including oneself, who have been persecuted by Karmic creditors and enemies, merge into this body and are ready to be offered.

#### **(4) Transformation of Impurity through Offering**

A. At first visualize the usual offering of five kinds of meat and five kinds of nectar in a skull cup. Recite these six words: Lang, Yang, Kang, Weng, A, Hong, and simultaneously visualize according to their respective meanings of fire, wind, space, increase, purify and transform.

B. Then visualize in accordance with the following stanza. At the beginning of each sentence yell "Pei" first, and visualize the pure body of Hai Mu cut this part off the impure body and add it into the skull cup.

*The thick forest of delusions, the self grasped by other religions, chop off the head, contain the offerings to be rid of heavenly demons.*

*The sinful Karma of the five-limb body, accumulated*

*from killing and erotic behavior, mince it to pieces and powder, thereby all grievances are forgiven.*

*The five organs and six intestines, the thirty-six impurities, chop them into pieces and stripes, the demons of Death and Aggregates are eliminated.*

*Leprosy and malignant poisons, all sorts of contagious germs, transformed into nectar, what can the Demon of Disease employ?*

*Sinful speeches are issued from the tongue, throat and windpipe, chop them off and offer them to Buddha, grudge and animosity are thereby released.*

*Delusions and scattered thoughts, all Karmic winds, join the air to blow up the fire, after the offering all are relinquished.*

*Mental Karma of greed, anger and ignorance, most are rooted in the sexual organs, chop it off and transform it into offering, enemies of jealousy are forever pulverized.*

*Six imbalances of fire and water elements, transformed into the soup in the skull cup, or help the cooking fire, they will not run wild from now on!*

## **(5) Bless the Offerings**

A. Recite in the usual fashion, "Lang, Yang, Kang" and consider the fire of desires and the wind of Karma

transform into those of wisdom, and the skull of the impure body merge into the huge skull cup visualized earlier, and all delusions also merge into the skull cup. Recite as usual, "Weng, A, Hong" and consider all parts of the body that have been chopped off are thereby transformed from scant to abundance, from impure to pure, and from Karmic to transcendental; then all these merge into a boundless ocean of nectar for limitless offering.

B. Recite the following stanza and visualize accordingly:

***The supreme blessing, like a shadow without substance, beyond awareness and intention, light of equanimity pervades.***

(Abide in the Mahamudra Samadhi of Wisdom Light)  
The secret blessing, the A-Han (Ewam) joy of the Yidam, proper and improper sexual behaviors, all are full of wisdom drops.

(Abide in the Embrace Union Samadhi of Bliss Sunyata.  
All worldly and transcendental beings merge with the Yidam parents, thereby even beings engaging in wrong sexual behaviors are blessed and offer their wisdom drops.)

***The inner blessing, Maha Yoga, the Great Harmony, killing in itself or as means, killing indiscriminately, the meat is piling up.***

(Abide in the Great Subduing Samadhi of Mahakala.  
Killing all evil, demonic beings and yet transfer their consciousness into Yidam bodies, and their corpses are added into the ocean of nectar for offering.)



***The outer blessing, all sorts of red and white delicacies, pure without pollution, all inclusive without omission.***

(Abide in the Pervading Heaven-and-Earth Samadhi of Great Offering. Abide in the incomprehensible Mystic Gate of Mutual Complementary of Visible and Invisible; all meat and vegetables in the world, of men or heaven, become offerings without interfering one another.)

## **(6) Formal Offering and Almsgiving**

A. First make offerings to the Gurus, Yidams, Dakinis, Protectors, etc.

B. Then make almsgiving to all grudgers and creditors of oneself and others in present and past lives, fulfill their appetites so that they are all very pleased and become Dharma protectors, no longer causing obstacles. After the almsgiving of nectar, offer them Buddhist teachings, at least recite the Heart Sutra once and the Mantra of Releasing Grievances seven times, or recite, in addition, other sutras, mantras or stanzas to instill wisdom and compassion. The details are omitted (by the author, but not the translator) here.

## **(7) Participation in Realization**

Eat and drink the food offerings that are displayed in the Mandala; visualize oneself as the Yidam and recite the following stanza:

***Like gold in ore, once purified would not be ore again,***

*majestic and magnificent, the vajra body is holy and pure.*

*Tummo needs no clothing, nectar needs no food, partaking food on behalf of all beings, there is neither gain nor loss.*

*Karmic winds are exhausted, scattered thoughts no longer arise, abiding in right thoughts, Dharmakaya is as indestructible as diamond.*

*Lion king entering the forest, pacing at will without fear, in contact with five poisons, the four demons dare not confront.*

*Wisdom body with wisdom eyes, seeing without duality, no trace of self, neither intention nor mistake.*

*Abiding in the equanimity of friends and foes, renouncing all love and hatred, the great compassion of same entity, turning all connections into enlightening activities.*

*Great enjoyment of wisdom, the sublime joy offered by Dakinis, the precious youthful vase body, supreme joy everlasting.*

*Pure body with all channels open, supernatural transformations occur without limit, fulfill completely all wishes, salvation of all beings that ends samsara!*

*Inconspicuously, as the Eternal Silent Light; conspicuously, as the wondrous rainbow; completing with the eight merits, it is the treasure of all Enlightenment.*

*Free from preconception and live in ease, without the body yet the great self remains, as long as there are beings remain in samsara, that would be the reason for my non-death.*

## **(8) Dedication of Merits**

*Seer and hearer, ridiculer and accuser, when being thought of, they all become liberated.*

*From the impure body transform into wisdom body; eternal, joyful, free and pure, all attain Buddha's five bodies.*

In the years of the Republic of China, Ji Chou (year), First month, the fourth day (i.e., Feb. 1, 1949), on the occasion of the auspicious birthday of the Maha Siddha of Non-death, Dangtong Jiapo (Thangtong Gyalpo), and the auspicious date of Holy Mind Green Dragon, composed in the retreat room in the Burmese Buddhist Monastery on the Vulture Peak in India.

Translated on May 8, 1996  
El Cerrito, California, USA.

## IV. Chod in the Light of Limitless-Oneness

Chod was named by its founder Machig Labdron as the Chod of Mahamudra. This indicates that the goal and function of this practice is nothing other than achieving Full Enlightenment. Enlightenment may be characterized in various ways to help people appreciate the value of working toward it and understand the principles underlying practices leading toward it. In recent years I have chosen to characterize Enlightenment as Limitless-Oneness which is originally pure. For a detailed exposition please read the first two chapters of my book "The Sixfold Sublimation in Limitless-Oneness" which is available for free distribution.

In the light of Enlightenment as Limitless-Oneness, the fundamental guiding principle of all Buddhist practices may be likened to a sword of liberation with two blades; one side is Opening Up, and the other side is No Attachment. The function of each Buddhist practice may be understood through these two aspects. As to advanced practices that emphasize non-duality as the approach, or refinement of all practices through non-duality in Sunyata meditation, one simply needs to remember that both blades are of the same sword.

In Limitless-Oneness all notions of a self are extinguished by limitlessness. No attachment in this indescribable state features two aspects: On one hand, it is the growing out of all kinds of attachments, like a man free from the importance of childhood toys; on the

other hand, it is freedom from the self-deceit that one could judge or control others. With full awareness of the selfless and conditional nature of all things, one would not interfere in others' ways but become liberated in such open-mindedness. Only thorough understanding of the conditional nature of all things could one help shape a sensible and tolerant outlook on life. The significance of this remark would become more obvious if one looks at ways of life that are guided by fanatic and dogmatic beliefs.

Limitless-Oneness implies, on one hand, the oneness of different aspects such as all aspects of Buddhahood, all aspects of samsara, etc., and on the other hand, the oneness of opposites such as good and evil, wisdom and ignorance, compassion and cruelty, etc. Both kinds of oneness would seem either confusing or impossible from the normal logical point of view. Therefore, its transcendental purport will be carefully explained below.

Limitless-Oneness is the originally pure state that a Buddha became awoken to at the moment of Enlightenment, i.e., the complete and final emergence from engulfment in worldly life. In such a state all distinctions are harmonized in their original purity and oneness. Such oneness can be experienced but cannot be described. Such oneness is beyond the understanding of beings who are still dominated by worldly considerations and know only to grasp on transient distinctions. In such oneness the distinctions are still recognizable and yet simultaneously undifferentiable.

Please consider the analogy of a loving mother who can distinguish all her children and yet could not make any distinction in her love toward them.

The Limitless-Oneness of opposites, such as good and evil, wisdom and ignorance, compassion and cruelty, etc., could be understood in an additional light. These opposites are in oneness in the sense that they are like two ends of the same street, the street being the conditional nature of all things. The conditions may be pulling and pushing toward one end or the other and resulting in extreme opposites, but both ends are similar as results determined solely by the combination of conditions. Once this conditional nature of opposites is understood, what is the justification for us to be proud of our goodness, to blame others for their evil activities, or to hold our goodness in antagonism against others' evil activities? With a switch in the circumstances, they could have been in our position and we theirs. Lacking such understanding often results in shallow displays of moral indignation and condemnation. One who sees deeply into the conditional nature of opposites could not help but have sympathy and compassion for all the fightings of opposites in life. Without such insight how could anyone forgive and forbear all the wrong doings in the world, and persist in the pure pursuit of Enlightenment?

In the light of Limitless-Oneness the usual distinction and antagonism of opposites would become meaningless. The one and only essential task would become the awakening of all beings to

Limitless-Oneness because that is the ultimate and true solution to all problems and sufferings in samsara. Machig Labdron's teaching that the real demons are everything that hinders the attainment of liberation obviously stems from this transcendental and panoramic perspective. Furthermore, any method that is conducive to this transcendental awareness could be employed under suitable guidance by experienced teachers. Therefore, the dismemberment visualizations and the inhabitation at desolate places by Chodpas should be understood in this light and be respected for its transcendental significance. Just as the activities of surgeons and coroners are service to mankind, the visualizations of Chodpas are service to beings at the spiritual level.

Although the object of visualized cutting is the body of the practicing Chodpa, it has been identified through visualization with all things in the Buddhist cosmos. Such an identification may seem absurd from the ordinary point of view; nevertheless, it is not a delusive act of imagination or self-deceit. Such an identification is possible only in the light of Limitless-Oneness, and it is meaningful because all things lack self nature, and when the illusion of a self is cleared away, they are experienced to be originally in oneness. Indeed, a Chodpa must understand the philosophy of Limitless-Oneness, of the unity of Dharmadhatu and the selfless nature of all things, in order to practice properly. Through such universal identification in visualization a Chodpa would gradually gain insight and experiences in the realization of Limitless-Oneness.

The main obstacle to realization of Limitless-Oneness is self-clinging. The main purpose of Chod visualizations is to reduce and eradicate self-clinging that is rooted in identification with the body. Hence Chod is a fundamental approach that works directly at the root of the hindrance, and its result would no doubt be a direct experience of Limitless-Oneness when the identification with the body is cut away. This is the reason why Machig Labdron characterized her teachings as the Chod of Mahamudra, thereby indicating that it is for the attainment of Dharmakaya.

The identification of a Chodpa's consciousness with the black Vajra Yogini should also be appreciated in the light of Limitless-Oneness. Vajra Yogini is a wisdom being meaning that she is a manifestation of the ultimate Limitless-Oneness. Through this manifestation all enlightened beings are represented, and all their wisdom, compassion and blessings are gathered. The practicing Chodpa is no longer an ordinary sentient being but the representative of all enlightened beings. Consequently all the visualized activities cannot have any connection with the self but aim only at the salvation of all beings in samsara. In modern terms, the Vajra Yogini serves as a role model for Chodpas, and in general, Yidams are transcendental role models for tantric practitioners.

In Limitless-Oneness spatial and temporal references would lose significance, consequently the salvation activities are unbounded by spatial and temporal considerations and limits. This is by no means fanciful talk only. Supernatural events and abilities that



transcend the normal spatial/temporal limitations are abundant. The practice of Chod, indeed of any Buddhist teaching, should be undertaken in full accordance with such understanding. The practitioner should possess a firm conviction that the practice does affect the salvation of all beings everywhere for all eternity.

The transcendence of Buddhist practices over spatial and temporal limitations also implies the carrying over of Buddhist insight gained through practices into daily life. Chod practiced in the light of Limitless-Oneness would free one from worldly considerations and thereby enable one to see clearly what is of real significance in life and make wise decisions in daily life. Furthermore, Buddhist practices would last a whole life for devout practitioners and there are even practices for the dying process and the Bardo (intermediate) state between death and the next life. A Chodpa could practice the identification with the black Vajra Yogini during the dying process or the Bardo state and thereby transcend ordinary death. When the identification is achieved, the dismemberment practice would then become the first act of universal salvation for this enlightened being.

The non-dual state of selflessness is emphasized by all Buddhist practices as the ultimate goal and achievement. No Buddhist practice is authentic without sublimation through meditation of non-duality. Chod practiced in the light of Limitless-Oneness is a direct attempt to realize non-duality. It is a practice of non-dual activities, or of non-duality in action. Even though Chod visualizations involve the cutter, the knife and the body dismembered,

all of them are cooperating as a team in achieving freedom from superficial duality. Non-duality should not be synonymous to non-distinctions and non-activities. Were they synonymous, why not simply use "dead" instead? Non-duality is truly realized only when the bondage of attachment to appearances is dismembered. When the servitude of submission to formality and appearance ends, non-duality is everywhere all the time, alive and active in a natural way.

What is the difference between one action as performed by a Buddha and a similar action as done by an ordinary person? If the actions could be isolated, taken out of their contexts, then on the scale of the universe there would probably be no noticeable difference. Nevertheless, a fundamental difference does exist in that each action of an ordinary person is somehow connected to self-centeredness and limited by spatial and temporal connections and considerations, whereas each action of a Buddha is an opportune expression of the wisdom and compassion stemming from Limitless-Oneness. Any Buddhist practice, including Chod, should be an attempt to channel all mental and physical activities into Limitless-Oneness. A Buddhist practitioner should practice with the intention to imbue the openness of Limitless-Oneness into all one's thoughts, emotions and activities.

Why is Chod a practice that can be taught to novices as a preliminary practice and yet is also characterized as a practice aiming at the highest achievement of

Enlightenment? In the light of Limitless-Oneness the answer is forthcoming. In Chod there is a tangible object to work with, namely the body in visualization. Hence it can be taught to novices as a preliminary practice, and as such its main function is the accumulation of merits through almsgiving and the reduction of bad karma through paying back to creditors and enemies. As a Chodpa gradually understands better and better the philosophy of Limitless-Oneness and gains more and more insight and realization through accumulation of Chod practices, Chod gradually displays its intended function and power as a direct attack to the self-clinging rooted in attachment to the body. In other words, as a Chodpa expands gradually into Limitless-Oneness through Chod practices, Chod is simultaneously sublimated from a superficial enactment of imagined activities into an experience of Limitless-Oneness in action.

In the light of Limitless-Oneness the transient nature of one's physical existence becomes obvious. In fact, one's physical existence could end at any moment. This is no reason for despair because one's wisdom and compassion could take shape through activities that would have influence everywhere forever. Furthermore, the transient nature of our physical existence, once fully understood, could help us become free from self-centeredness; it would then become easier to give up preoccupation with something that cannot be kept for good. One could then even sense the common fate of living beings, the fear, the dangers, the struggles and the sufferings of life, and awake to the compassion that

encompasses all beings in oneness. The conditional nature of all things would dictate the continuation of samsara with its many pitfalls. Nevertheless, the compassion born of Limitless-Oneness also commands unceasing enlightened activities of salvation. Dedicating one's life to the service of the cultivation of all beings' Enlightenment becomes a deliberate choice and act of will that illustrates the transcendence of Bodhicitta, the unification of wisdom and compassion, over transient human existence. One who lives a life of Dharma service would enjoy what life could offer best. Chod practiced in the light of Limitless-Oneness becomes natural and meaningful; without the illumination of Limitless-Oneness Chod could become a bloody struggle with the self that even further tightens the bound of self-consciousness.

## V. Reflections on Chod

Through my Dharma practices I gradually become less concerned with myself and begin to attempt to appreciate the limitless perspective of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The basic structure of Chod consists of the destruction of the body and self, and identification with the black Vajra Yogini and her salvation activities. The underlying message of this structure seems to convey the following image: The great mother Machig, from her infinite compassion and liberation, is looking down at all sentient beings suffering in samsara and calling out: Do not be fooled by the body and its transient existence, cut through attachment to it and all worldly considerations, become one with the wisdom of selflessness and devote your life to salvation services!

Chod is a universal practice in almsgiving because what is given away is in everyone's possession, even a beggar can practice almsgiving in this way. However, Chod amounts to the most difficult practice in almsgiving because what would be given away, if the intention is taken seriously, is the body and that means one's very existence. The extent of sacrifice that a Chod practice is hinting at would be a challenge to one's sincerity in the practice of almsgiving.

Proper caring of the physical body is emphasized by Tantra. However, there is also the teaching that one should act with complete disregard for oneself in order to be liberated and to best serve others. How could these contrary teachings be balanced or even harmonized in

practice? Under normal circumstances proper caring of the body is adequate because it would enable one to perform and continue Dharma practices and services. Nevertheless, there are also situations when complete disregard for one's interests is needed in order to gain enlightened realization or provide better compassionate service. For example, very advanced tantric practitioners would live a life of spontaneity to realize non-duality. Such a way of life takes neither one's health and life, nor social norms and values into consideration. As recorded in the "Sutra of Compassionate Flowers," Great Bodhisattvas had willingly given all their possessions including bodily parts to satisfy sentient beings' wishes; their intention is simply to set ultimate examples of compassionate services. Chod is an ideal harmonization of these contrary teachings. On one hand, there is no physical damages involved in the practice, and on the other hand, self-sacrifice is practiced over and over again in visualization.

Viewing the body as the aboard of this life, then the practice of Chod also implies freedom from attachment to one's aboard, to one's native place, to one's experiences good or bad, and to a sense of familiarity. It is difficult to become free from attachments to all these; if one can observe oneself carefully then it will become apparent that one is always reacting to one's past experiences good or bad, and that one's activities are often tinted by the shadow of past experiences. The aim of all Buddhist practices is the complete emancipation from all bondages, and to achieve this goal a practitioner needs to extend the implication of his

practices to all aspects of daily life. Therefore, the extension of implication as indicated above is of great importance.

One basic constituent of the notion of something that exists independently is that it is there continuously without noticeable changes. In fact, all things change in time and there is no such continuity; the only continuity that anything might have is one's grasping to the concept of it, and, upon closer examination, this grasping often turns out to be also impermanent. Most of the time one's grasping to the body is simply a grasping to a vague mental concept or image. Through the visualization of dismemberment Chod is mentally destroying the spatial and temporal continuity of the imagery of one's body. Hence, Chod is a practice to go beyond the grasping to the mental image of one's body. Through Chod practices it is possible to reach the stage that is free from this image.

Ma Machig, as she is affectionately called by Tibetans, emphasizes that in Chod the offerings should be given out of compassion. Through the offering of the body in visualization the object of attachment is no longer there; consequently, two effects are arrived at simultaneously: To the donor, appreciation of both the wisdom of no attachment and the freedom from attachment increase; whereas to the recipients, they lost the object of their antagonism (envy, animosity, malice, fighting, etc.), and instead of merely experiencing the non-existence of antagonism they are unexpectedly satisfied to their hearts' content. Due to such generosity they might

reflect and gain some appreciation of Sunyata, especially the all encompassing aspect of it. How compassionate and wise is Ma Machig to have bestowed on us such a wonderful practice that all who are touched by it may grow in wisdom and compassion! This is indeed the epitome of a gift of compassion.

Transforming one's hindrances and weakness into helpful training grounds for advancement to the goal is the essential strategy that enlivens the quest for Enlightenment. Without such understanding and maneuvering the quest for Enlightenment could easily be trapped by formality and stereotyped thinking into the snare of dualistic antagonism, the very trap that one is trying to avoid. This is also the reason why some advanced teachings in Buddhism would emphasize non-action over purposeful activities. (Non-action in this context does not mean no activities, but only no preconceived activities.) Through Chod the object of fundamental attachment and delusion is not only reduced but also wisely employed toward the development of compassion and Enlightenment. One could say that the strategy of Chod is to transform attachment into useful compassionate service; this is the marvelous wisdom of Ma Machig, the Dakini, and a special feature of advanced tantric practices in general.

Chod also provides an opportunity to face the moment of departure from this life, even though it is only in visualization. At such a moment a reflection of one's whole life would naturally arise; and one could not help but ask oneself about what one has done with this life



and what it all means. If all worldly relations and possessions would abruptly become naught in the end, what better choice does one have than to devote oneself to the everlasting Dharma service and quest for Enlightenment? In the universal service of salvation through propagation of Dharma, personal death no longer means the end of service or the vacuousness of life. Since the moment of departure from this life is uncertain, how could we keep procrastinating our Dharma practices and services? The fragile nature of our health and vitality dictates that we engage in Dharma practices and services now lest the opportunity of a lifetime would be lost.

Blood relation is a basic bond of humanity, and it is based on the body. Hence, Chod would be an effective practice to transcend considerations and biases that are rooted in blood relations. Marital and sexual relations are related to the body, therefore the liberating effect of Chod would also spread over to curtail attachments rooted in such relations. Health and economic considerations are rooted in the preservation of the body. Therefore, Chod would also affect the grip of such worries. In short, all worldly considerations would be affected by Chod. It is necessary to work toward clarity of mind that transcends these relations and considerations in order to attain Enlightenment. However, this does not mean that these relations and considerations are necessarily hindrances to liberation. Transcendence does not mean indifference to nor avoidance of these relations and considerations; indeed transcendence should imply an impartial understanding

of the nature of all these worldly relations and considerations.

In the traditions of Chod there are many rituals with varying visualizations as to the manner of dismemberment and the principal and attending recipients invited. Such details of visualization are important because they enhance the effects of visualization. Besides, in the light of non-inherent-existence which implies the futility of grasping at concepts, these details are all there is to the practice.

Ma Machig teaches that there are three ways to pronounce "Phat," the key word used during a Chod practice, and each conveys respectively the intention of calling, cutting through, and offering. On one hand, we should be grateful for such teachings on fine discriminations in the usage of expressions; on the other hand, this fine point illustrates the versatility of formal expressions and the possibility of being misled by fixed interpretations of expressions.

The offering of the body as visualized in Chod signifies complete offering of one's worldly possessions, including one's life. In fact, the path for a spiritual quest is often one of spiritual attainment through complete offering of one's life and self. For example, in Christianity in order to provide a basis for universal salvation Jesus made the dramatic and extreme sacrifice of knowingly moving toward crucifixion. Even now the blessing of his sacrifice is conveyed through the

sacrament which uses bread and wine to symbolize the offering of his body and blood. Eucharist as practiced in Catholic churches resembles in spirit the dismemberment offering of Chod. In most cases one's spiritual quest consists of lifelong cultivation of transcendence through spiritual practices and services. Chod is quite suitable for lifelong cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

When one is preoccupied with minor things, one would lose sight of higher goals. Engaging in disputes over minor points would prevent one from recognizing the essential meaning of one's existence— What kind of life would be worth living? Does one have a purpose in life to live and die for? Facing life and death could awake one from worldly entanglements and cause one to look for the meaning of one's life. Chod is vividly connected to life and death through visualization. Hence, Chod could serve as a constant reminder of impermanence and help one to stay awake from worldly sorrows. Why should one remain in the mental state of holding grudge against anyone? Wake up from such a miserable mental cage, and live in one's natural innocence and purity.

Physical appearance is a major source of prejudice. Racial prejudices are basically due to identification with physical appearances. People whose appearances are disfigured by diseases or accidents are sometimes shunned or mistreated. The underlying common nature of humanity and even of all sentient beings is identical. To thoroughly experience this truth one needs to be free from preconceptions based on attachment to

appearances. Chod is the chopping off of all appearances and all attachments to appearances, therefore it is a very handy tool in achieving liberation from the tyranny of appearances.

Just as the quest for universal peace on earth and within human minds had risen from the ashes of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, from the destruction visualization of Chod would rise a sincere yearning for eternal liberation. The quest for peace would take generations of all people working together to maintain its vitality and obtain some tangible results. The quest for liberation would also require the continuous efforts and devotion of all who are drawn to it to grow, bloom and yield fruits. Chodpas with their profound yearning for liberation born of spiritual experiences would naturally endeavor to contribute to both the quest for liberation and the quest for peace. Peace without liberation is superficial and might entail suffering. Peace based on liberation will be genuine and everlasting.

## VI. Related Topics

Tantra is traditionally sealed in secrecy because many tantric practices are on the surface questionable and may lead to unnecessary controversies and hindrances. Chod is obviously one such practice, and that is why I tried to dispel possible misunderstandings earlier in this work. Another practice of this genre is the tantric love practice. It is beyond the scope of this work to go into a fine explication on this subject. Here I simply indicate that tantric love practice can also be regarded as a kind of offering of the body and the self. Of course, tantric love practice should not be considered as merely an offering because there are many significant and profound aspects of using and transcending sexuality to attain liberation.

In Tibetan culture a person's burial may take one of several forms such as burial under ground, cremation, water burial (scattering cremated ashes into a lake or river), and sky burial. Usually the burial to be chosen is determined by astrological calculations that take into consideration the times and dates of a person's birth and death. Sky Burials are usually conducted on a high plateau. It consists of Buddhist rituals as performed by Lamas, cutting off the corpse into pieces, including breaking the bones to expose the marrow, and thereby offering the body completely to the vultures. It is believed that such complete sacrifice would exhaust all one's bad karma, and that the merits generated through making such offerings to satisfy the vultures, representing all sentient beings, would enable one to attain rebirth in a Buddha's Pureland of one's choice.

Chod and the Sky Burial share the same outlook and belief as to the purpose and usefulness of dismemberment of the corpse.

How does Chod compare with organ and tissue donation and organ purchasing of our time? Besides the obvious that one is in visualization and the others are in deed, the motivation of Chod is neither for worldly rewards nor just limited to charity. Chod is motivated by the aspiration to achieve Enlightenment of all sentient beings. The fruits of Chod practices are often not immediately noticeable as in the case of organ transplants. However, real achievements do not go unnoticed; Chodpas who have attained realizations are inevitably recognized and revered by people who benefit from their healing or exorcism services. From our modern perspective Chod could be superficially linked to organ and tissue donation, and be introduced as a practice to prepare the mind for such donations. Actually, by learning more about Chod through practicing it, the outlook on life of a potential donor could be enlarged and even sublimated toward the quest for Enlightenment.

# References

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2. A Chinese translation of the Tibetan book "An Exposition of Transforming the Aggregates into an Offering of Food, Illuminating the Meaning of Chod"

《媽幾腦準祖師略傳及其施身法等教授》；裝巴阿度語，陳健民筆受。在圓明版《曲肱齋全集》第十七冊內。

3. My translation of this ritual constitutes Chapter III above: 〈除魔障冤孽我執身見施身法〉；在《曲肱齋推恩集》內，見圓明版《曲肱齋全集》第十六冊 207-214 頁。此即本書第三章之出處。

# Appendix :

## Giving Self up    Yutang Lin

*Go no further into the haunting sorrows that are present.*

*Consider instead how to respond to benefit all involved.  
Discarding what is hard to endure will lighten the load.  
Yielding to others' conveniences will open one's mind.*

Comment:

Chod, the tantric practice of cutting through, as taught by the female patriarch Machig Labdron simultaneously combines cutting attachment to body and making offerings to all beings into a superb practice. Now in the light of such wondrous unification of wisdom and compassion, one may apply the teaching to the cutting out of self-grasping. Since grasping to self is hard to discern one can confront only the sorrows that spring up in daily life. When one becomes aware of some sorrow or worry, on the one hand, one should practice not paying attention to it any further so as to get out of its shadow, simultaneously on the other hand, one should consider instead how to behave and respond so as to benefit all involved. In this way, whenever sorrows arise, one endeavors to practice giving self up to benefit others. Then all sorrows that are hard to endure will



gradually dissipate out of neglect, while one's mind will gradually open up with the habit of making things convenient for others.

May this indication of how to extend the teaching of Chod into daily-life handling of sorrows and application of compassionate tolerance serve as a small token of my gratitude to the skillful teachings of Ma Machig.

Written in Chinese and translated on April 13, 2001  
El Cerrito, California

## Universal Chod Yutang Lin

*In dream curved-knife cut through joints of limbs in blessing,*

*Immediately all joints of limbs to body felt relaxed and light.*

*Universally cut through all associations created by our minds,*

*In the absence of delusions and illusions original purity revives.*

Comment:

In 1996 during the course of my writing of the book, "Chod in Limitless-Oneness," in a dream I saw a curved-knife cut through the four joints that connect my limbs to the body, and immediately all those areas felt relaxed and I understood that it was the blessing of the releasing effect of Chod. This morning while I was asleep suddenly I comprehended that, if the principle of such blessing is applied universally to cutting through all associations to matters and objects that are created by our minds, then all delusions and illusions would be cleared away. Our worries never ceased because our mental association never stopped. If one could universally Chod (cut through) mental associations, then one would immediately resume the tranquility of original purity.

Written in Chinese on June 6, 2006

Taipei, Taiwan  
Translated on June 30, 2006  
El Cerrito, California

# **My Bodhicitta Vows**

(May be Used for Dedication of Merits)

Dr. Yutang Lin

1. May virtuous gurus remain with us and those departed return soon!
2. May perverse views and violence soon become extinct, and Dharma spread without hindrance!
3. May all beings proceed diligently on the path toward Buddhahood and achieve the goal before death!
4. May the Great Compassion flourish in all beings and never regress until they reach perfect Buddhahood!
5. May the Great Wisdom thrive in all beings and never regress until they reach perfect Buddhahood!

# Chod in Limitless-Oneness

**NOT FOR SALE**

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