

# THE KNELL OF IMPERMANENCE

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Fig. 1 Double-Sided Skull Drum; Tibet; likely 19th century; human bone, leather, clappers attached with string;  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$  in. (11.3  $\times$  31  $\times$  14 cm); The British Museum; Mrs. Herbert Godsal; acc. no. 1919,-473; image © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved

## DOUBLE-SIDED SKULL DRUM

Tibet  
probably 19th century

## SUMMARY

Death and violence play prominent roles in the imagery and ideas of Tantric Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism Scholar David DiValerio examines a skull drum as a symbol of life's impermanence, the norm-transcending power of wrathful deities, and the Buddhist philosophical cosmos. Double-sided drums like this may have been used in Cutting rituals, a visualization practice taught by the female tantric practitioner Machik Labdron which focus on the severing of the self, and by extension, the ego.

A double-headed percussion instrument fashioned from the tops of human skulls joined at their apexes has been a part of the standard ritual paraphernalia for practitioners of the later forms of Tantric Buddhism since the time of their rise in India. The skull drum falls under the broader category of double-sided hand drum, or *damaru*, which are most commonly made of wood, and whose heads may be round or in an elongated shape that approximates that of a skull. These drums may be festooned with ribbons, tassels, bells, and other adornments (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Handheld Drum (*Damaru*); Tibet or Mongolia; early 20th century; wood, silk, leather, cornelian; 42½ × 3½ × 12 in. (variable) (108 × 8.9 × 30.5 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Robert and Lois Baylis; SC2019.3.5

The drum is held in the practitioner's right hand, between the extended index finger and thumb, with the long strap grasped between the palm and the remaining fingers. When held upright and rotated back and forth in a semicircle, the two pellets at the ends of the strings extending from opposite sides of the drum's waist hit the drumheads simultaneously. With just a little practice one can produce a variety of rhythms, or make a continuous sound by quickly spinning the drum back and forth. Meanwhile, the practitioner's left hand remains free to take up other ritual implements, such as a handbell or a rudimentary trumpet fashioned from a human leg bone, as the liturgy may call for (figs. 3 and 4).<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 3 Leg Bone Trumpet (*Kang Ling*); Tibet; 18th–19th century; human bone, copper, coral, leather; 14¼ × 3 × 3½ in. (36.2 × 7.6 × 8.9 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Robert and Lois Baylis; SC2019.3.2



Fig. 4 See a monk performing a ritual in Bhutan (24:07-27:05). From the film by Marie-Noëlle Frei-Pont made in 1974-1982. Reproduced with permission. Travel with Claudio, "Country Life in the Bumthang Valley Bhutan 1974 – 1982," *YouTube*, February 20, 2023, 1:22:14, [https://youtu.be/K3Bjr8K\\_DEw](https://youtu.be/K3Bjr8K_DEw).

## HUMAN REMAINS AS RITUAL IMPLEMENTS

To begin to understand why human remains are used in this manner in Tibetan Buddhist ritual, we must consider ourselves from two opposite perspectives, by which our paradoxical standing in the universe is established. For one, these items serve as a reminder of our mortality and the broader impermanence of all things—the central truth of all of Buddhism. At the same time, the items are emblematic of supreme tantric deities, who represent power and enlightenment, and therefore, according to late tantric theory, our own true nature (see other examples of this type of deity here and in the Exhibition section of this site: 1, 2). These buddhas and the members of their retinues are commonly depicted holding musical instruments made of human bone and cups made from skulls (figs. 5, 6, 7 and 8), while sporting garlands of heads, bone aprons (fig. 9), and capes made of flayed corpses. These emblems of death are mixed among an imaginative array of menacing weapons and suggestions of sensuality. The frightening adornments serve as analogues to the flowers, jewels, and emblems of royalty that surround Buddhist divinities of a more pacific nature. The presence of these objects as

the paraphernalia of these supreme tantric deities speaks to the tantric worldview as a system that sees the inversion of norms as a source of power. Impurity is therefore to be embraced, and in the ancient Indian worldview, death, violence, and sex were the pathways to such impurity. In light of these associations, ritual implements fashioned from human remains play a central role in the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner's cultivation of a multisensory, multidimensional self-identification with the supreme tantric deity – while simultaneously reminding her of their ultimate insubstantiality. Tibetan ritual thinking and practice grows out of a dense matrix of such paradoxes.



Fig. 5 Skull Cup with Base; Tibet; 18th–20th century; silver, turquoise, coral, brass alloy; 2-3/8 × 7¼ × 5¾ in. (6 × 18.4 × 14.6 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2011.13.11a-b



Fig. 6 Skull Cup with Base; Tibet; 18th–20th century; silver, turquoise, coral, brass alloy; 2-3/8 × 7¼ × 5¾ in. (6 × 18.4 × 14.6 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2011.13.11a-b



Fig. 7 Skull Cup with Base; Tibet; 18th–20th century; silver, turquoise, coral, brass alloy; 2-3/8 × 7¼ × 5¾ in. (6 × 18.4 × 14.6 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2011.13.11a-b



Fig. 8 Skull Cup with Base; Tibet; 18th–20th century; silver, turquoise, coral, brass alloy; 2-3/8 × 7¼ × 5¾ in. (6 × 18.4 × 14.6 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2011.13.1



Fig. 9 Ritual Bone Apron; Tibet/Nepal; 18th–19th century; bone; 24½ × 31½ × 1¼ in. (62.2 × 80 × 3.2 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.69.4

These are far from the only ways of thinking about such objects. For one, there is a tradition of expounding upon the symbolic meaning of the many facets of a ritual implement like the skull drum. One Tibetan author directs the practitioner to understand the empty space inside the skull drum as representing the true nature of all the buddhas and of reality itself (*dharmakaya*), while the skins of the drumheads represent the unity of apparent phenomena and emptiness. The two pellets represent the unification of method and wisdom, which together make liberation possible. Ribbons in five colors hanging from the drum represent the five buddha families. The different sounds produced by the drum are said to represent the emptiness of the self, offerings to the deities, and the subjugation of the different realms of existence, among other things. Meanwhile, it is pointed out that the drum, its user, and the sounds produced all obtain their identities as such only through their dependence upon one

another. This kind of interdependence defines all phenomena, which are therefore said to be empty of their own inherent existence. In this strain of native Tibetan interpretation, the object itself becomes a matrix of ritual and philosophical thought.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE PRACTICE OF CUTTING**

The ritual and meditative practice of Cutting (*Chod*) exemplifies how these hand drums have traditionally been used, while providing us with a glimpse of the Tibetan religious worldview from which such practices arise. Cutting was first widely propagated by a female Tibetan tantric practitioner known as Machik Labdron (1055–1153) (fig. 10), who had received a basal form of the practice from her teacher, the Indian yogin Padampa Sanggye. Since Machik's time, Cutting has proliferated throughout the Tibetan religious world and is today practiced within the Geluk, Kagyu, and Nyingma traditions of Buddhism, as well as in Bon. While sharing much in common with the most elite and secretive forms of tantric practice, Cutting has traditionally been practiced widely in Tibet, by both women and men, clerical and lay, individually or in groups. Although traditional texts prescribe doing Cutting in potentially haunted places like charnel grounds, crossroads, or riverbanks, as part of a demanding ascetic trial, it is more commonly performed at one's home or in a monastery or temple as part of a quotidian cycle of practice. While itself a tantric practice, Cutting is believed to have roots in the ideology of the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) Sutra*.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 10 Painting of Machik Labdron (1055–1153); Kham region, eastern Tibet; 19th century; pigments on cloth; 24 3/8 × 15 3/4 in. (61.9 × 40 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2010.3 (HAR 57037)

The practice of Cutting involves the practitioner’s chanting or singing a liturgy that details a series of visualizations (fig. 11), while simultaneously generating those visualizations and associated attitudes—and at the same time playing the hand drum, leg bone trumpet, or manipulating other ritual items according to a received script (all done in unison with others, if performed in a group setting). Practitioners of Cutting typically use a particularly large drum with round heads made from acacia wood. Cutting practice begins with playing the drum and thigh bone trumpet, which calls into the meditator’s presence malevolent as well as more positive types of spirit beings. The



main part of the practice entails visualizing a wrathful tantric goddess as she uses a hooked knife to lop off the top of one's own skull, and then proceeds to chop the rest of one's body to bits, which are held within that skull cup. This mass of one's flesh, bones, and blood is imagined to be purified, and then offered to the different classes of beings who inhabit the universe, first the malevolent and then the sympathetic. This satisfies their desires utterly, and also relieves the practitioner of all karmic debts.



Fig. 11 Moktan Digital, "Chod Practice by H.H the Dungsey Garab Dorje Rinpoche," *YouTube*, February 17, 2017, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=yf-64uZYJMw>

Cutting is believed to be effective in overcoming the demonic entities that exist in the world. Traditional histories relate how its practice has been used by individuals to make forlorn places habitable for humans, to halt outbreaks of communicable diseases, and even to cure oneself of tuberculosis or leprosy.<sup>4</sup> Most important, Cutting provides the means to defeat the most omnipresent and formidable demon of all: attachment to one's own being, which is the root of all ignorance and the reason behind our continually taking rebirth in flesh and bone within the realm of suffering we inhabit.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Ayesha Fuentes, “On the Use of Human Remains in Tibetan Ritual Objects” (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2020) for a detailed study of the use of human remains in Tibetan ritual objects, including as musical instruments, with particular attention to South Asian precedents.

<sup>2</sup> These statements are drawn from a translation by Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson of a brief exposition on the symbolic meanings to be found in the damaru as used in Cutting practice, written by one Gyuerme Losel (“Gyur med blo gsal), a Nyingmapa practitioner of uncertain date. The translators conclude that in his view, “The damaru is a microcosmic embodiment of the basic structure of the universe and of sentient life, and a thorough examination of it encompasses the entire scope of Buddhist philosophy and meditation,” Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson, ““Explanation of the Secret Gcod Ḍa Ma Ru’: An Exploration of Musical Instrument Symbolism,” *Asian Music* 10, no. 2 “Tibet Issue,” special issue (1979): 63. Jeffrey W. Cupchik, “The Tibetan GCod Ḍamaru—A Reprise: Symbolism, Function, and Difference in a Tibetan Adept’s Interpretative Community,” *Asian Music* 44, no. 1 (2013): 113–39 expands upon Dorje and Ellingson’s work by exploring variations in interpretation of different aspects of the damaru in a living tradition of Cutting practice.

<sup>3</sup> See Michelle Janet Sorenson, “Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013) for a comprehensive history of the Cutting tradition.

<sup>4</sup> The chapter on Cutting contained in the traditional Tibetan history the Blue Annals is a wellspring of such lore. See George N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1949), 980–1005.

## FURTHER READING

Cupchik, Jeffrey W. 2021. *The Sound of Vultures' Wings: The Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Ritual Practice of the Female Buddha Machik Labdrön*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Edou, Jerome. 1996. *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chod*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

Orofino, Giacomella. 2000. "The Great Wisdom Mother and the Gcod Tradition." In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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