

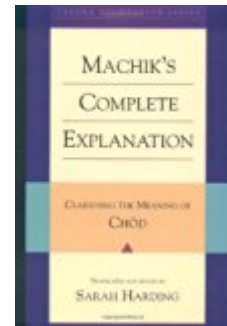
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Machig Labdrön. *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd: A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food*. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2003. 365 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55939-182-5.

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## An Offering of Chöd

Machik Labdrön (Ma gcig Lab kyi sgron ma, ca. 1055-1153 C.E.) is revered by Tibetan Buddhists as an exemplary female philosopher-adept, a yogini, a dakini, and even as an embodiment of Prajñā parmitā, the Great Mother Perfection of Wisdom. Machik is primarily known for her role in developing and disseminating the “Chöd yul” teachings, one of the “Eight Chariots of the Practice Lineage” in Tibetan Buddhism.[1]

Western interest in Chöd began with sensational representations of the practice as a macabre Tibetan Buddhist ritual in ethnographic travel narratives of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.[2] Such myopic representations have been ameliorated through later translations of Machik’s biography and various ritual manuals, particularly those describing the “banquet offerings.”[3] Since Western translators have privileged the genres of biographical and ritual texts, the richness of indigenous materials on Chöd (both in terms of quantity and quality) has been obscured.[4] This problem has been redressed by Sarah Harding’s translation of *Machik’s Complete Explanation [Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byed]*, one of the most comprehensive written texts extant within the Chöd tradition. Given the prominence of Machik and Chöd in the history and praxis of Tibetan Buddhism, Harding’s translation is a valuable contribution to the study of this figure and her teachings.

Harding, a faculty member at Naropa University, was

asked by her teacher Khyabje Kalu Rinpoche to do a translation of the *Complete Explanation*. She became familiar with the text during a three-year retreat in the late 1970s when she studied this text and had a daily Chöd practice based on texts by Karma Chagmed and Jamgon Kongtrul. Although Harding suggests that questions of provenance (of the tradition and of the text under consideration) are outside the scope of her project, it would have been interesting if she had discussed how this text was actually used by retreatants, herself included, within the context of the Kagyu lineage. It is frequently observed that Chöd, although not continuing as a lineage unto itself, became incorporated into the Bön tradition and the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Geluk schools of Tibetan Buddhism, but individual variations in the interpretations and practices of Chöd remain to be charted and discussed.

The *Complete Explanation* consists of ten chapters, composed in a wide range of genres. The first two chapters are in the *rnam thar* (“liberation biography”) genre. The colophon of the Tibetan text ascribes the liberation story to the fourteenth-century figure Namkha Gyaltsen (Nam-mkha’ rGyal-mtshan), who has been recognized as eighth in the Gangs-pa Chöd lineage originating with Machik. These two chapters have been translated into English numerous times, including popular interpretations by Tsultrim Allione and by Jerome Edou.[5] Although Harding does not intend to provide a comparative study of the various biographies of Machik, the ma-

majority of which are still awaiting translation, her recontextualization of the *nam thar* within a work of indigenous Chöd commentarial literature provides readers with a more nuanced understanding of Machik and her system, and contributes to a growing discussion on Tibetan Buddhist liberation stories.[6]

The following eight chapters illustrate core elements of Chöd philosophy and praxis according to the traditions of Machik. Each of these chapters takes the form of a dialogue between Machik and a principal student or students. The third chapter includes Machik's discussion of the periodic degeneration of the Buddhist Dharma, as well as a description of a visualization of Machik and her retinue. Here Machik also outlines characteristics of the "specialness of Chöd": Chöd contains the essence of sutra and tantra combined, it liberates the four *bdud* (negative forces), and it cuts the root of ego-fixation.

The fourth chapter discusses *bdud* and *lha-dre* (divine-demonic forces). The motif and significance of *bdud* in Chöd have been discussed by many writers, and Chöd is often reductively represented as exclusively concerned with *bdud*. Etymologically, "*bdud*" is a Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word "*m? ra*," and refers to the source of death, including spiritual death. In Indic and Buddhist traditions, *m? ra* has been personified into a demon (or demons) which causes obstructions to spiritual practice. As Harding's translation makes clear, in Chöd the four *m? ra* are manifestations of the individual's own mental afflictions, thus differing from conventional presentations in Buddhist texts. Although Harding acknowledges the complexity of Machik's systems of *bdud*, she opts primarily to translate *bdud* as "devil" (p. 38), thus obfuscating the individual's mental production of the *bdud*. Although Machik does entertain the "reality" of demons and deities, her primary emphasis is on the role of the mind in producing and elaborating such manifestations as a source of ego-clinging and suffering.

The fifth chapter, which Harding says "is unquestionably the core of the book" (p. 16), provides a detailed description of Chöd praxis.[7] Although Harding does not point this out, Chöd is presented here in the form of preliminary activities (*sngon 'gro*) that traditionally form the foundation for Tibetan Buddhist practice in various lineages. With little variation from other traditions, the text describes taking refuge, cultivation of *bodhicitta*, training of the mind in the Four Immeasurables, offerings for the accumulation of merit, and the act of dedication. Because Chöd stresses the equality of all beings, as well as the development of compassion towards those who are con-

ventionally discriminated against, traditional teachings on topics such as "the Four Immeasurables" have a special poignancy and depth in the context of Chöd. Chöd differs from other traditions in its emphasis on the ultimate perfection of generosity—in particular, the giving of one's own body to a variety of sentient beings without discrimination—and it echoes Mah? y? na teachings such as the meditations on the equalizing and exchange of self and others. These offerings are perhaps Chöd's most distinctive and most misunderstood element, but this book's detailed account clarifies that visualizing the offering of one's body to satisfy the needs and desires of all sentient beings is a means of developing both compassion and the wisdom of emptiness. The ultimate aim of such offerings is to develop awareness that is non-referential regarding self and others.

The sixth chapter presents a lexicon of the signs of death and a physiology of the coarse and subtle bodies. As Harding notes (p. 17), this discussion might be influenced by the fact that one of Machik's primary teachers was Drapa Ngonshechen, who is credited with the discovery of the four medical tantras (the *sman gyi rgyud bzhi*). Chapter 7 considers the ethical and social responsibilities of a Chöd practitioner, including obligatory vows, appropriate dress, and ritual implements and places for practice. This chapter also explains the interpretation of dreams and visualizations to evaluate one's success in the practice. This topos is continued in the eighth chapter, wherein various categories and types of apparitions are described and analyzed within the context of Chöd praxis. Finally, echoing the topic of the degeneration of the Dharma presented in chapter 3, chapters 9 and 10 are explicitly of the *lung bstan* ("prediction") genre, considering the future of Chöd in the respective contexts of political decline and spiritual degeneration.

While Harding acknowledges that she did not intend her translation as a scholarly work, it is difficult to identify an appropriate audience for her text. Harding claims that she wanted to present the *Complete Explanation* "as it has been used by Tibetan practitioners for many years" (p. 14), but such an arcane text (and practice) obviously requires the guidance of a learned teacher. Though such guidance is necessarily beyond the scope of a written work, Harding gives little hermeneutic guidance to practitioners. Because of its formal and philosophical complexities, the *Complete Explanation* also calls for detailed commentary. Harding does supplement her translation with a brief introduction and various critical apparatuses (including annotations, a glossary, a bibliography, and an index), but she does not provide much

explication of the text. She occasionally references one of her Tibetan teachers in her notes, but these notes usually concern mundane points. Moreover, although Harding consulted with numerous teachers in the Tibetan tradition, she seems to have relied primarily on English-language secondary sources for her preface and introduction, and thus her critical materials add little to the corpus of Chöd studies. Since Western studies have provided insufficient contextualization of the praxis itself, especially from an indigenous Buddhist perspective, further critical engagement—in the form of historical contextualization, philosophical analysis, or textual criticism—would have been a welcome complement to the first English translation of the *Complete Explanation*.

Although there have been some preliminary studies, there is still much work to be done by scholars to situate Chöd within a wider contextual frame of Tibetan Vajrayana praxis, and within a historiography of Indian, Central Asian, and Tibetan Buddhist praxis. Key problems which await investigation include the traditional claim that Chöd was transmitted to and gained popularity in India, the influence of Pha Dampa Sangye's Zhije (*zhi byed*) lineage, and the nature of the relationship between Zhije and Chöd. Ideally, given the introduction of Chöd teachings to Western students by renowned teachers such as Namkhai Norbu, Thrangu Rinpoche, the late Kalu Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, and Khalkha Jetsun Dampa Rinpoche, the *Complete Explanation* will encourage readers to investigate the system of Chöd further, and to generate an increasingly nuanced understanding of its teachings.

#### Notes

[1]. Tib. *sgrub brgyud shing rta brgyad*. There are eight lineages of Buddhism in Tibet: *sNa 'gyur rNying ma*; *bKa' gdams*; *bKa' brgyud*; *Zhangs pa bKa' brgyud*; *Sa skya*; *gCod* and *Zhi byed*; *dus 'khor/sbyor drug (K? lacakra)*; and *O rgyan bsnyen grub*. Only the first five (the *bKa' gdams* tradition being essentially assimilated into the *dGe lugs* tradition) continue as independent lineages.

[2]. Such writings include: Emil Schlaginweit, *Buddhism in Tibet* (London: Susil Gupta, 1863), pp. 162-163; Lawrence Austine Waddell, *The Buddhism in Tibet, or Lamaism* (London: W. H. Allen, 1895), p. 74; and Alexandra David Neel, *Mystiques et magiciens du Tibet* (Paris: Plon, 1929), pp. 148-166.

[3]. Translations of the liberation biography of Machik from the Tibetan version of the *Complete Explanation* are found in Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wis-*

*dom* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1984); and Jerome Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996).

Perhaps the earliest translation of a Chöd ritual text into a western language is Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's translation of Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa's *Ye shes mkha' 'gro ma*, included as book 5, "The Path of the Mystic Sacrifice: Subduing the Lower Self," in Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines: Or Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path, According to the Late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935; 1958), pp. 276-341. Other Western language translations of ritual texts put into public circulation include: Phabongkha bDe chen snying-po, *Chöd: Cutting Off the Truly Existent "I"*, trans. Lama Thupten Zopa Rinpoche (London: Wisdom Publications, 1984); *Cutting Through Ego-Clinging*, trans. Anila Rinchen Palmo (Montignac: Dzambala, 1987); *Throma Nagmo: A Practice Cycle for Realization of the Wrathful Black Dakini, A Treasure of Dudjom Lingpa*, trans. Sarah Harding (Junction City, California: Padma, 1990); and *The Garden of All Joy*, trans. Lama Lodo Rinpoche (San Francisco: Kagyu Drodron Kunchab, 1994).

[4]. This is not to say that there have not been other western studies of Machik and Chöd in English. This body of literature includes the following: D. I. Lauf, "Die gCod-Tradition des Dam-pa sang-rgyas in Tibet," *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zurich I* (1970), pp. 85-98; Charles Van Tuyl, "Mila-ras-pa and the gCod Ritual," *Tibet Journal* 4, no. 1 (1979), pp. 34-40; Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (rev. ed.), trans. Geoffrey Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 87-92; Massimo Facchini, "The Spiritual Heritage of Ma gcig Lab sgron," *Journal of the Tibet Society* 3 (1983), pp. 21-26; E. de Rossi-Filibeck, "The Transmission Lineage of the gCod Teaching According to the 2nd Dalai-Lama," in *Contributions on Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy*, ed. E. Steinkellner and H. Tauscher (Wien: University of Wien, 1983), pp. 47-57; Janet Gyatso, "The Development of the gCod Tradition," in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, eds. B. N. Aziz and M. Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), pp. 320-341; Giacomella Orofino, *Contributo allo studio dell'insegnamento di Ma gcig Lab sgron* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1987); David Stott, "Offering the Body: The Practice of Gcod in Tibetan Buddhism," *Religion* 19 (1989), pp. 221-226; Carol D. Savvas, "A Study of the Profound Path of Gcod: The Mahayana Buddhist Meditation Tradition of Tibet's Great Woman Saint Machig Labdrön" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990); Karenina

Kollmar-Paulenz, "Die biographie der Ma gcig lab sgron ma—Quellenanalytische Vorarbeiten," in *XXIV Deutscher Orientalistentag vom 26 bis 30 September 1988 in Köln*, ed. Werner Diem (Stuttgart: Abdoldjavad Falaturi, 1990), pp. 372-380; Erberto La Boe, "A Case of Mistaken Identity," in *Tibetan Studies: PIATS Fagernes 1992*, ed. Per Kvaerne (Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994); K. Kollmar-Paulenz, "Der Schmuck der Befreiung": *Die Geschichte der Zi byed- und gCod-Schule des tibetischen Buddhismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993); Kalu Rinpoche, "Chöd," in *Secret Buddhism: Vajrayana Practices*, trans. Francois Jacquemart and Christiane Buchet (San Francisco: Clear Point, 1995), pp. 141-164; Jerome Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996); Migyur Dorjee Madrang, "A Discussion on Great Women in Tibetan History," trans. Sonam Tsering, *Tibet Journal* 2 (1997), pp. 69-90; K. Kollmar-Paulenz, "Ma gcig lab sgron ma: The Life of a Tibetan Woman Mystic Between Adaptation and Rebellion," *Tibet Journal* 23, no. 2 (1998), pp. 11-32; Adelheid Hermann-Pfandt, "On a Previous Birth Story of Ma gCig Lab sgron ma," *Tibet Journal* 25, no. 3 (2000), pp. 19-31; and Giacomella Orofino, "The Great Wisdom Mother and the Gcod Tradition," in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 396-416. A number of these sources are absent from Harding's bibliography.

[5]. See note three above.

[6]. Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz has compiled a list of biographies of Machik in *Der Schmuck* (see note four above), pp. 70-105. Jerome Edou has since located additional biographies not known to Kollmar-Paulenz, specif-

ically: *phung po gzan skyur ba'i rnam par bshad pa las ma gcig lab sgron ma'i rnam par thar pa mdor bsdus tsam zhid*, by Kunpang Tsöndrö Sengé (Kun spangs btson 'grus seng ge, ca. 13th century) (Edou, 222); and a rare blockprint, *Ma gcig ma'i rnam thar*, that Edou has in his collection (Edou, x, 194, n. 28, 220). Unfortunately, both of these texts are difficult, if not impossible, for other students interested in Chöd to locate.

Translations of Tibetan liberation biographies and studies of this genre include: *The Lotus Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava*, trans. Erik Pema Kunsang (Boston: Shambhala, 1993); James B. Robinson, "The Lives of Indian Buddhist Saints: Biography, Hagiography and Myth," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José I. Cabezón and Roger Jackson (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996); Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava: The Indian Consort of Padmasambhava*, trans. Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998); Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo, *Lady of the Lotus-Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 1999); Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[7]. Harding neglects to mention that this chapter has been previously translated by Carol D. Savvas, and does not include Savvas's substantial dissertation in her bibliography. See Savvas (note four above), pp. 195-284.

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