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"EXPLANATION OF THE SECRET GCOD DA MA RU"  
AN EXPLORATION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENT SYMBOLISM

By  
Rinjing Dorje and Ter Ellingson

The "Explanation of the Secret Gcod Damaru", a short treatise by 'Gyur med Blo gsal, expresses a unique understanding of life as seen through consideration of a musical instrument. From an ordinary viewpoint, the Da ma ru is simply a small drum used in the ritual practices of Gcod and other Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions. However, as seen through 'Gyur med Blo gsal's penetrating analysis, 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.

Musical instruments seem to have been important objects of Buddhist meditation from the earliest times. The Buddhist Canon of Texts in the Pali language, followed in Southeast Asia, contains many references to musical instruments attributed to the Buddha himself. Samyutta-Nikāya (128 ff.) gives an extensive description of the Indian "lute" (viṇā) as a metaphoric example of the conditioned and composite nature of existence. In the Aṅguttara-Nikāya, the Buddha describes the tuning of the viṇā to illustrate the "tuning" of the mind in meditation (266ff.). In Aśvaghōṣa's famous Bodhicarita, musical instruments become metaphors of death and impermanence. Yet, perhaps no Buddhist work explores the philosophical potential of a musical instrument so thoroughly as 'Gyur med Blo gsal's "Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru".

Even if we look beyond the scope of Buddhist literature, we find few parallels to 'Gyur med Blo gsal's study on the symbolism of the da ma ru in other non-Western musical traditions. An obvious case for comparison is the Chinese tradition of commentary on the ch'in zither (van Gulik 1940), particularly the treatise by Hsi K'ang (van Gulik 1941). A comparison of this work with 'Gyur med Blo gsal's study shows some typically extreme contrasts between Chinese and Tibetan viewpoints and approaches. Hsi K'ang's elaborately beautiful contemplations differ sharply from the concise, straightforward assertions used by 'Gyur med Blo gsal to point to many levels of meaning in as few words as possible. Although Hsi K'ang advocates escape from "the constraining shackles of worldly life" (82), his method seems to be becoming lost in esthetic

FIGURE 1



གངས་ཅན་མགོན་པོ་ལམས་ཀྱི་སྐྱོན་ །།

"Protector of the Land of Snows, Labs kyi Sgron"

Ma gcig Labs sgron, founder of Gcod, pictured as a dancing Mkha' 'gro ma, with a da ma ru and dril bu bell.

contemplation of the phenomenal appearances that 'Gyur med Blo gsal is so concerned with penetrating beyond.

Yet, there are some general similarities between the two works. Both authors begin with a statement of intentions, discuss the raw material of their respective instruments, proceed to an enumeration of its constituent parts, and end with a discussion of musical sound and its significance. Although Hsi K'ang's work would seem to be too early, we nevertheless wonder if it might have undergone some influence from the Indian Buddhist traditions regarding instrumental symbolism that helped to inspire 'Gyur med Blo gsal's later study. At any rate, 'Gyur med Blo gsal's treatise on the symbolism of the *ḍa ma ru* stands in its own right as a milestone in the study of instrument symbolism, as a unique statement of how a musical instrument may express a way and understanding of life.

#### THE GCOD TRADITION

Gcod is a Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition founded around the beginning of the twelfth century A.D. by the female teacher Labs kyi Sgron ma, also known as Ma gcig, "The One Mother". (Fig. 1) Her life is briefly described in G. Roerich's English translation of 'Gos lo tsa ba's *Deb ther Sngon po* (1478: Vol. I, 220ff.). She learned to read at an early age, and made a deep study of the Perfection of Wisdom, a classical Indian Buddhist system of thought which emphasizes the "Emptiness" of all phenomena. By this study, "she cut the rope of mental (obstacles), saw the Perfection of Wisdom just as it is, and the precepts of Gcod ("Cutting") arose in her mind" (Dpa' bo Gtsug lag 1565: Vol. III, 763). After studies and contacts with other teachers, she began to teach Gcod, the method of "Cutting" to her followers.

Gcod eventually spread throughout Tibet and became one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions. Unlike other such traditions, Gcod did not coalesce around a network of affiliated monastic institutions. It emphasizes special methods of religious practice that are meant to be carried out by individual meditators, rather than by large groups of monks. However, since the philosophical basis and teachings of Gcod are shared with other Tibetan traditions, it can be practiced by followers of other traditions as well. Thus, Gcod has become a pan-Tibetan individual-oriented system of religious practice that cuts across sectarian lines.

"Cutting" the bonds of misleading perceptions and preoccupations by the Gcod method requires a dramatic synthesis of music, dance, meditation, and other ritual elements. In the most famous Gcod ritual (English translation in Evans Wentz 1968; recorded excerpts on Beyer n.d.), the participant goes to a lonely place, taking with him or her:

For completely overcoming the Proud ["demons"  
representing self-pride],  
A predator's hide with four sets of claws;...  
The great superior thighbone [trumpet] that  
subjugates gods and demons;  
The Dā ma ru drum that overcomes illusions;  
The garland of bells that suppresses the Ma...

(Gcod yul: 1b-2a)

The participant begins the ritual by visualizing all sorts of powerful gods and demons, and then sees him/herself commanding and leading them around "like a flock of goats or sheep", catching them by the feet, whirling them around his/her head three times, and dashing them to the ground (2b). He/she dramatizes this act by throwing down the predator-hide and another accessory.

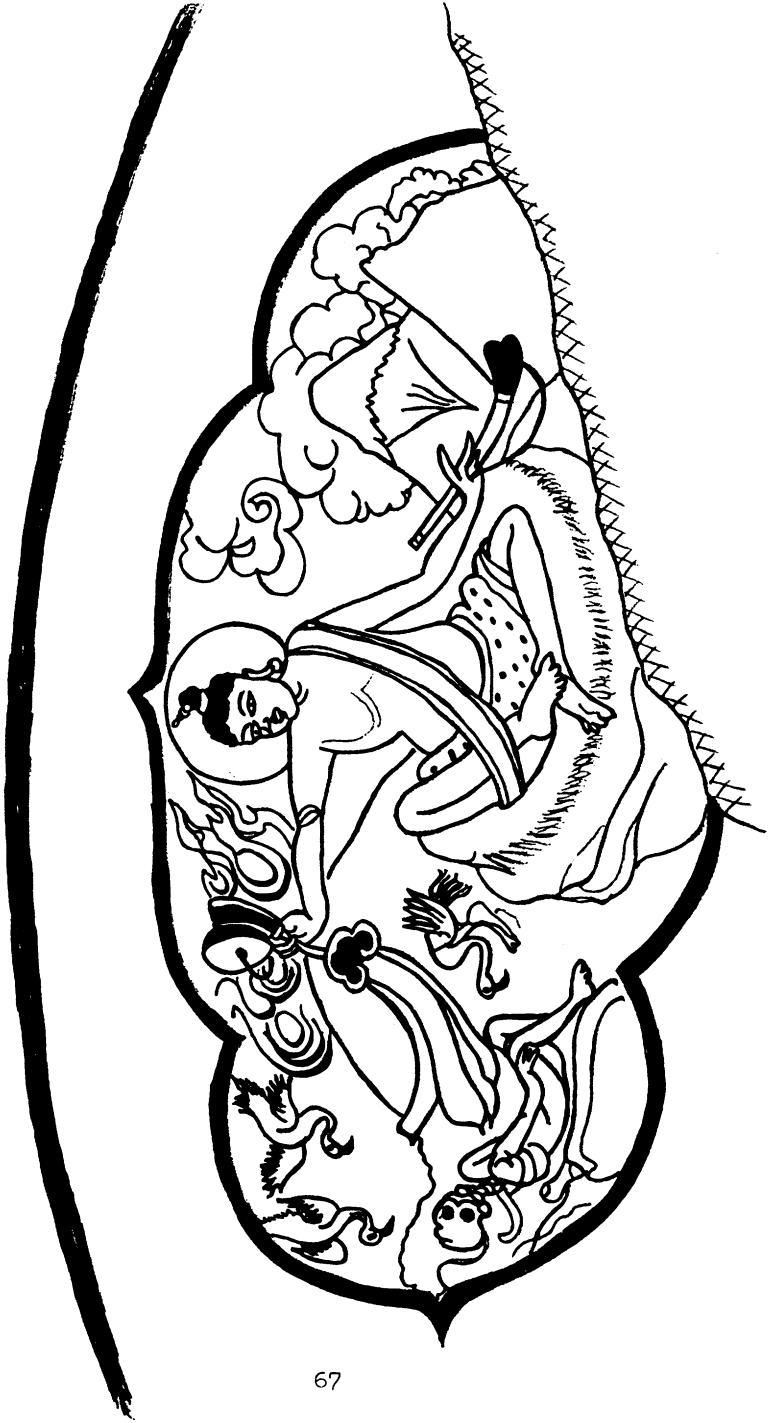
The ritual continues to unfold as a vivid psychodrama. The participant (for convenience, because Gcod originated with Ma gcig Labs sgron, we will use female pronouns from now on) visualizes herself as having instantly become the Mkha' 'gro ma ("Sky-walker", female celestial being) of supreme Wisdom:

Then blow the human thighbone trumpet loudly,  
And dance the stamping-dance (bro brdung) of  
extended views:  
Phaṭ!  
I, the yogin, practicing training in fearlessness,  
By the thought that embraces the sameness of World  
and Nirvana,  
Beat a dance upon the gods and demons of the Self.  
Let worldly conceptions of dualism be ground to  
dust!...

Phaṭ!  
When dancing in the Eastern continent, Lus 'phags  
gling,  
The Heroes and Skywalkers rotate in a crescent-  
shaped dance-ground,

FIGURE 2: A GOOD RITUAL

Alone in the mountains, the meditator visualizes his body as a corpse (lower left), and offers it to spirits in the form of vultures, attracted by the rkang gling and ḡa ma ru.



(From a painting on a Ccod ḡa ma ru; collection of Field Museum, Chicago)

On the head of the King of Hate: Chems se chem!  
 The trumpet of Mirror-wisdom sounds: Kyu ru ru!  
 Hūṃ! Hūṃ! Hūṃ!  
 Phaṭ!  
 When dancing in the Southern continent, 'Dzam bu  
     gling,  
 The Heroes and Skywalkers angle in a three-  
     cornered dance-ground,  
 On the head of the Lord of Death and Pride:  
     Chems se chem!  
 The skull-drum of Balanced Wisdom sounds: Khro lo lo!...

(2b-3b)

However, all of this is a preparatory stage to the real "Cutting" practiced in Gcod. First, the participant views her own body as a symbolic representation of the universe to be offered as a gift to the Buddhas. Next, her own understanding becomes a ferocious goddess who dismembers her body with a knife and offers it as a feast for a host of fierce gods and demons. These are also attracted (and the meditation dramatized) by means of music: (Fig. 2)

How clear the sound of the great superior skull-  
     drum!...  
 How sweet the melody of the human thighbone  
     trumpet!...  
 Like vultures descending and covering a corpse,  
 In just one moment, all of you, come!

(6a)

The visualization is carried out in vividly horrifying detail, while at the same time engaging in thorough philosophical contemplation of the implications of intellectual and emotional attachment to the conception of an individual selfhood that is impermanent, composite, and subject to forces beyond personal control. By integrating the dramatized meditative experience and its contemplated significance, the participant comes to know all threatening "gods and demons" as bdag 'dzin lha 'dre - "gods and demons of holding to [the concept of] the Self". Thus, the mistaken, dualistic perception of the self as an entity independent of all others is refuted, the equally Empty nature of all entities is realized, and the Perfection of Wisdom is attained.

The vivid ferocity of Gcod meditation has led some Western scholars, such as Evans-Wentz (1968: 295ff.) to see its roots in non-Buddhist practices involving human sacrifice and even cannibalism. However, the technique of meditating in cemeteries on the body's impermanence was taught by all Indian Buddhist schools, and seems to be an archaic part of Buddhist practice. Likewise, the use of psychological shock techniques to produce new perceptions and insights is hardly unique to Gcod. Such techniques are used, for example, in Zen, although in a much more abstract and intellectualized form. Finally, most of the emotionally-upsetting imagery and paraphernalia of Gcod, from the forms and attributes of ferocious goddesses to the use of human-bone instruments, is directly borrowed from Indian Tantric Buddhism. We have already mentioned the Indian Buddhist philosophical basis of Gcod (for a more thorough discussion of Gcod philosophical ideology, see Tucci 1970: 106-112).

Thus, the uniqueness of Gcod and the genius of Ma cgig Labs sgron and her followers is shown not so much in the individual elements of ideology, dramatization, or use of ferocious imagery, as in the complex and powerful way in which all of these elements are synthesized in Gcod ritual. In Gcod, every philosophical teaching is vividly dramatized, and every object and action of the ritual expresses both surface and deep meanings. In order to enrich the experiencing and understanding of this synthesis of object, action, and meaning, the followers of Gcod have composed treatises on the symbolism of various ritual accessories (e.g., the Ka pā la'i Brtags thabs, a study on the symbolism of the skull cup by Gshongs chen Ri khrod pa, n.d.b). The object of our present study, 'Gyur med Blo gsal's treatise on the Damaru drum, was composed for the same purpose.

#### MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Gcod practice normally requires three types of musical instruments: a human-thighbone trumpet (rkang gling), a garland of bells (dril bu'i gyer kha), and an hourglass-shaped drum with suspended clappers (ḍa ma ru or ḍā ma ru). Other instruments, such as the dril bu handbell, may be used in some cases. Although the drum normally used in Gcod is made of wood, some texts suggest that a drum made from two human skulls (thod rnga or thod dam) may be used. One text (Gshongs chen Ri khrod pa n.d.a: II3) permits replacement of the wooden ḍa ma ru by either a drum made from the occipitals of two human skulls (te'u chung) or by one made from "the bones of a woman's pubic region" (gsang ba'i rnga chung, "secret small drum"). Khams smyon (n.d.:



FIGURE 3

RKANG GLING THIGHBONE TRUMPET MELODIES (RTA) FROM GOOD YUL

Notation					
Mantra	Om	Hūṃ	Trāṃ	Hrīḥ	Āḥ
Remarks	Beautiful and long, like the sound of a bee	Fierce and long, like the voice of a horse	Angry and ragging, like the roar of the tigris	Fluctuating and varying, like the voice of a dharva	After beginning with fluctuating and varying, as in the preceding melody, progressively rising [in volume and pitch]

Staff lines to indicate pitch levels, dotted lines to show attacks, and varying thicknesses to show relative sound volume have been added to the notations to show how they might be played in actual performance. The original unmodified notations are in Good yul (8b).

550) even describes a "backwards" or "perverted" Gcod, the followers of which employ copper trumpets (zangs dung) along with other objectionable elements, such as cannibalism.

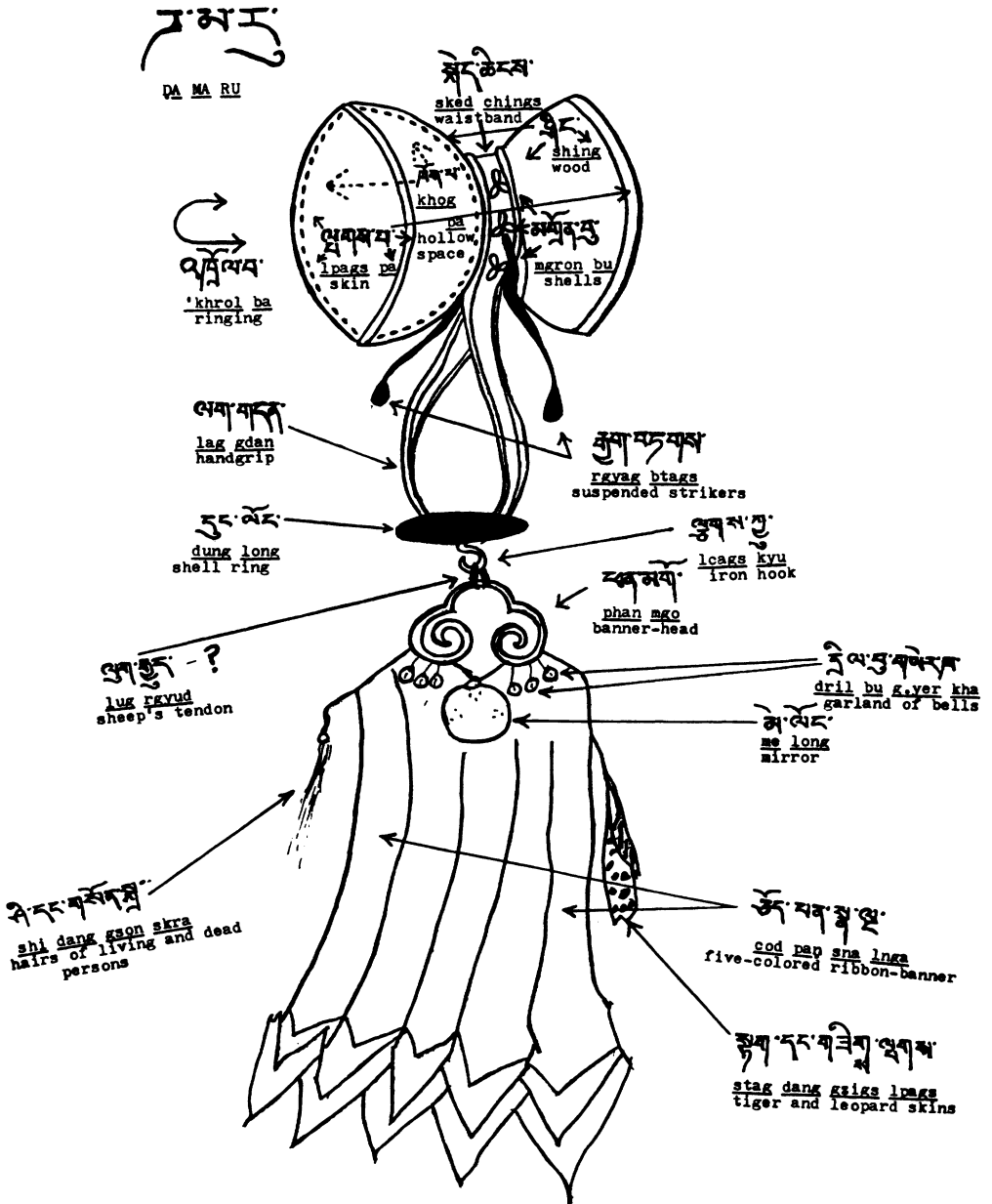
The trumpet used in Gcod is called rkang gling, "thighbone flute," rkang dung, "thighbone trumpet", or mi rkang mchog gi gling bu, "superior human thighbone flute". Although the name rkang gling also designates the short metal trumpets used in Buddhist monastic music, those used in Gcod are actually made from human leg bones. These instruments, apparently borrowed from Indian Tantric Buddhism around the ninth century A.D., are symbolically associated with Buddhist concepts of the impermanence of phenomenal existence, and are generally used in Tantric rituals involving Fierce (drag po) deities and modes of ritual action. Since the normal method of "burial" in Tibet was to cut up bodies and feed them to vultures or other carnivores (giving one's body for the use of other creatures conveyed religious merit), materials for the manufacture of bone instruments were easily procured.

The trumpet consists of a leg bone cut off about 30cm. from the knee joint. Two holes cut in the ends of the projecting knobs (epiphyseal condyles) of the knee joint form the trumpet's double bell, while a shallow conical recess cut into the other end of the piece of bone forms the mouthpiece. Leather (preferably human skin) is sewn around the bell end, and the mouthpiece may be encased in metal. Some rkang gling are wrapped entirely in wire from mouthpiece to bell, and an extended metal bell may even be added, although these modifications are not usually used in Gcod.

The trumpet is used to play short melodies (rtā) with or without drum accompaniment. As is usually the case with Tibetan trumpets, these melodies are of the dbyangs type (Ellingson article, this issue), composed of sequences of subtle modifications of pitch and loudness which fluctuate continuously rather than being separated into discrete levels. The melodies are generated by mantras, syllables which are significant on a ritual rather than a linguistic level, which occur in the ritual text. Each melody is an acoustic expression of the emotional character of its generating mantra: for instance, the peaceful mantra Om produces a "long and pleasant" melody, while the fierce Hūm gives a "raging, neighing" melody (Gcod yul: 8b). The melodic units or components generated by individual mantras are combined into longer melodies according to the combinations of mantras occurring in the text. Thus, for the mantra Hūm! Hūm! Hūm! (p. 68 above), the component-melody for Hūm should be played three times. The rkang gling melodic

FIGURE 4

THE GCOD DA MA RU (not to scale)



notations for the Gcod yul ritual (8b) are shown in the accompanying figure (Fig. 3), with pitch reference lines added to show how they might be played in an actual performance.

The "garland of bells" (dril bu'i g.yer kha) used in Gcod consists of a string of small spherical metal bells, about 1-1 1/2 cm. in diameter, with enclosed metal pellets. As our text specifies, these are to be mounted on the drum itself; thus, they sound when the drum is played, enriching its sound.

Da ma ru (or, alternatively, cang te'u) is the name for a class of Tibetan hourglass-shaped clapper drums originally derived from an Indian prototype of the same name. All are made of two roughly hemispherical hollow bodies (either human skulls, the probable prototype, or wood), joined at their apices, with skins stretched and glued across the open ends of the hemispheres, and with a circular padded cloth wrist strap and two diametrically-opposed string-suspended pellet strikers attached to the "waist" of the drum. All are played by holding the right forearm vertically, grasping the waist of the drum between thumb and forefinger, and oscillating the drum in alternate clockwise-and-counterclockwise movements so that the suspended strikers strike the two drumheads (performing schools differ on whether this movement is accomplished by wrist oscillations or by movement of the thumb and forefinger alone). Beyond these common points, drums of the da ma ru class vary considerably in size, shape, and ornamentation. Some are painted, on either the body or drumhead, with abstract or pictorial designs, while others may be ornamented with precious metals or stones. Even the skin of the drumheads may be that of a human (for the human skull drum), another mammal, or a snake.

The Gcod dam, Gcod rnga, or Gsang Gcod da ma ru ("Secret Gcod Damaru") is the largest and most complexly ornamented of the drums of the Da ma ru class. It varies between 18-25 cm. in diameter, and its two halves are always hemispherical, rather than skull-shaped. From the top rim of the drum itself (when held in playing position) to the bottom of the series of ornaments suspended from the waist, its length may approach nearly a meter. Since our translated text gives a detailed description of its parts, we will not describe it in detail here. The accompanying figure (Fig. 4) shows the main parts, and should be referred to when reading the translated text.

The da ma ru's music consists of two types of sound elements: "beats" (brdung) and "ringing" ('khrol ba).

Beats are produced, depending on the performing tradition, either by a single one-way twist that brings the strikers into contact with the drumskins once, or by a back-and-forth twist that causes one strike by each striker on each of the two skins. Single beats are combined into numerical series of "counts" (grangs): thus, two beats, three beats, etc. The beats of such a series are more or less equal in length; but, when two series are combined (two beats plus three beats, etc.), their respective beats may differ in length. A series designated by a specified number of beats may include additional beats with varying structural functions; thus, "Three Beats" may include up to nine actual beats (cf. Ellingson 1979). In our manuscript, "Three Beats" means three back-and-forth movements, or six actually-sounded beats, with the fourth one accented.

"Ringing" is a rapid clockwise-counterclockwise oscillation of the drum which produces a continuous stream of rattling pulses. The length of a "ringing" section may coincide with that of a vocal or trumpet melody, or be determined by meditational or other "non-musical" factors. A "ringing" passage may cadence with one or more "beats", and be preceded or followed by a series of "counts".

In the Tibetan instrument classification system, the ḍa ma ru is usually classed along with bells as a "rung" ('khrol ba) instrument, in contrast to other types of drums which fall into the "struck" (brdung ba) class. The thighbone trumpet is classed as 'bud pa, "blown". The fourth instrument category, rgyud can ("stringed") or rgyu rkyen ("cause-and-agent"), is not used in Gcod or other religious music. However, 'Gyur med Blo gsal seems to suggest that, depending on its various functions and on the viewpoint from which it is seen, the ḍa ma ru can be taken either as a rung, struck, or cause-and-agent instrument. This non-rigid approach to categorization is a fundamental element of Tibetan thought which must be considered in any investigation of symbolism in Tibetan music.

#### SYMBOLISM IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST MUSIC

Like all elements of Tibetan Buddhist ritual, music, together with the instruments used to produce it, incorporates a rich variety of symbolic meaning. Because of this, some Western scholars tend to dismiss much of this music as "ritual sound" that is somehow different from, and inferior to, "music". For instance, Walter Kaufmann (1975: 17-18) remarks, in a discussion of several instruments, including the ḍa ma ru and rkang gling:

- ...The small drum has no musical function as such.
- ...None of these instruments has any musical function.
- ...When the sounds of these ritualistic instruments are superimposed on instrumental music, the resulting noise can be most perplexing.

(1975: 17-18)

Such judgments, made by drawing a dichotomy between the "ritual" and "musical" components of ritual music, are absurd from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Music can be an effective part of ritual only to the extent that it is "musical". It is included in ritual as a sensuous offering (mchod pa) for the ears of beings who are meditated upon as endowed with every kind of perfect faculties. Thus, in order to constitute an effective offering, ritual music must be equal or superior to the best of the music played in everyday human life.

The minimal requirements governing the composition and performance of Tibetan Buddhist ritual music are familiar to musicians in every culture: the music must be "aurally beautiful" (snyan pa) and "skillful" (mkhas pa). The need for "skillfulness" requires not only a practiced playing technique, but also that the compositional structure of a piece be suited to the tastes of beings with the most highly refined perceptual and cognitive faculties. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhist instrumental compositions not only include melodies based on subtly, almost imperceptibly varying tonal contours (Fig. 3), but also rhythmic structures that surpass in mathematical complexity most known types of music (Ellingson 1979). The subtle and complex sounds heard in this music are undoubtedly the cause of the "most perplexing" impressions of "noise" formed by non-Tibetan listeners.

The "beauty" of Tibetan Buddhist music can take different forms. Generally, music can be divided into "Peaceful" (zhi ba) and "Fierce" (drag po) styles, according to the natures of the beings to whom it is offered. Peaceful deities generally prefer music that is relatively slow, soft, and smoothly played; while Fierce deities like music that is faster, louder, and incorporates more "rough" contrasts. In addition, the mood and style of specific musical pieces vary according to their functions in one or another of "Four Modes of Ritual Action" ('phrin las bzhi): "Pacification" of personal impairments; "Extending" of good personal qualities and benefits; "Controlling" of forces and elements that hinder attainment of desired goals; and "Fierce" destruction of obstacles. The music used in Gcod tends towards the fierce end of the stylistic spectrum,

having the awesome type of appeal that one text describes as "Beautiful, brilliant music resounding like a thousand thunders" (Blo bzang Skal bzang Rgya mtsho n.d.: 101).

However, in addition to the required elements of beauty and skillfulness, ritual music must include a third element:

...beautiful-sounding instrumental music that overpowers the mind...and melodies...that are beautiful, and yet have a meaning.

(Atiśa n.d.: 281b-282a)

Buddhist ritual music is, in fact, distinguished from secular music not by the "musical" factors of acoustic complexity and beauty (although there are strong stylistic contrasts in these areas), but by the association of specific symbolic meanings with ritual musical sounds and their sources of production. Even secular dance music has a general, contextual kind of meaning, since its sound indicates happy feelings and freedom from distress (Grags pa Rgyal mtshan n.d.: 25). However, ritual music is distinguished by its potential for a specifically verbalizable symbolic meaning for every musical sound, set of sounds, or instrument. This distinguishing characteristic is not restricted to Tibetan or Buddhist music: for example, in the music of Bach, the entrance of strings in a Passion recitative, or the appearance of a certain melodic pattern in the instrumental accompaniment of a cantata aria, may convey symbolic meanings of divine status or of sadness that the same instruments or sounds would not convey in a secular concerto by the same composer. Just as in this comparative example, the presence of "meaning" in the music does not make the music less "musical". It does, however, make the music more meaningful, and adds to the musicological task of dealing with technique and esthetics a third analytical dimension, that of musical symbolism.

Symbolism is mentioned in most Western writings on Tibetan Buddhist music. Observations on various symbolic associations of specific instruments have been made by Laufer (1923), Blechsteiner (1937: 255), Evans-Wentz (1960: 128-9), Crossley-Holland (1968: 83-4), Ellingson (1974a), and Vandor (1976: 52-5), among others. Most of these observations tend to leave the impression that each instrument has one specific symbolic meaning that is, as it were, officially and universally recognized. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism allows for a large number of possible meanings for every symbol, according to the particular viewpoint chosen.

For example, Crossley-Holland mentions that "The hand-bell and hand-drum [ḍa ma ru]... symbolize Wisdom and Method..." (1968: 83-4). This statement is correct on one level of interpretation, in connection with a particular type of ritual. However, according to the text of the Gcod yul ritual, the ḍa ma ru is associated with "balanced Wisdom", the bells with "the Wisdom that comprehends separate aspects", and the rkang gling with yet a third aspect of Wisdom, "Mirror-like" (Gcod yul: 3a-b). And, in 'Gyur med Blo gsal's treatise on the ḍa ma ru, the instrument symbolizes practically every major aspect of the Buddhist view of life as seen from the standpoint of Gcod, while the Wisdom-Method combination is symbolized by the ḍa ma ru's two suspended pellet-strikers.

None of these alternative symbolic meanings of the ḍa ma ru would be accepted as a simple statement of fact by all Tibetan Buddhists. Someone studying 'Gyur med Blo gsal's special viewpoint would disregard the other interpretations as irrelevantly simplistic; a performer of the Gcod yul ritual would accept the interpretation given in its text; and a participant in a ritual like, say, Sdang ba Rnam sreg, would be inclined to the Wisdom-Method interpretation. However, the interpretations are not mutually exclusive, for a follower of 'Gyur med Blo gsal's method might accept and use the other interpretations at different stages in his religious practice. The "Tibetan approach" to symbolism is contextual, functional, and pragmatic. If, as Tibetan Buddhists maintain, the Buddhist teaching itself was taught in different forms to suit the needs, abilities and inclinations of different persons, so that each person will necessarily interpret the same things differently as his understanding reaches new levels, then there must necessarily be different levels of interpretation for any particular symbol.

Bearing this in mind, we can see Blo gsal's treatise on the ḍa ma ru in its proper perspective, as a brilliant individual contribution towards increasing the depth and meaningfulness of the experience of Gcod practice through contemplation of one of the characteristic Gcod instruments. As such, it is a valid "explanation" of the ḍa ma ru for those with the interests, abilities, and training to follow his approach. It is not an explanation of the symbolism of the instrument which says the last word on the subject and admits of no alternative interpretations. Like all Tibetan writings on music and other aspects of Buddhist practice, it represents both the "official" explanations received by the author through his lineage of teachers, which are valid for followers of that lineage's tradition, and the insights of the individual author.



Such insights are not arrived at arbitrarily. Tibetan Buddhism recognizes two authoritative sources, "scripture and reason". "Scripture" includes both written and oral statements by previous teachers, while "reason" implies thoroughgoing exploration of a point by study, analytical examination, and meditation. If a given point contradicts either scripture or reason, it is to be rejected. In addition, new insights can be received by very advanced persons through direct meditative experience, dreams, and other experiential means. This direct type of insight is an important source of musical compositions. However, again, insights received in this way will, if valid, contradict neither scripture nor reason.

'Gyur med Blo gsal does not give any indications of the sources for his interpretation of the ḍa ma ru. Some of his interpretations are undoubtedly "scriptural", handed down through his teaching lineage. For instance, Gshong chen Ri khrod pa (n.d.a: 113) cites an anonymous "definition" or "philosophy" of the ḍa ma ru that agrees with Blo gsal in stating that the instrument may be made of sandalwood or "what the mind desires". On the other hand, much of the Explanation must consist of 'Gyur med Blo gsal's own insights: the work is too unified in form and content to be a scholarly compilation from other sources, and, if such a unified interpretation was part of his lineage's teachings, there would have been no need or opportunity for him to write the work as his own. Considering the complex array of Buddhist symbolic elements incorporated into the Gcod ḍa ma ru itself, some with and some without generally accepted interpretations, it seems likely that his Explanation was the result of prolonged analysis of, and meditation on, the instrument and the guidance furnished by his lineage's teachings.

#### AUTHOR AND TEXT

We have not yet been able to identify 'Gyur med Blo gsal. From various points of evidence in the text, we see that he was a follower of the Rnying ma pa, the oldest of the four major Tibetan Buddhist traditions. However, his exact lineage affiliation and date have yet to be determined. His name does not appear in several standard Tibetan histories of the Gcod tradition.

The present translation is based on two manuscripts of the text which were located by Rinjing Dorje in the possession of two Lamas of the Rnying ma pa tradition in Nepal. Each of the present co-authors worked separately on translating one of the text copies, and both collaborated on

the final translation and notes. We wish especially to thank Bde kya Rin po che for lending us the manuscript that is reproduced in transliteration in the appendix to this article.

#### TRANSLATION

(Numbers in the left-hand margin refer to the corresponding lines of the Tibetan text given in the Appendix. Sometimes it has been necessary to rearrange the order of lines to produce a clear English translation. Such rearrangements are indicated by line numbers in parentheses. Where no numbers are given, the order of lines follows the Tibetan text.)

(Page 1A)

1 The Explanation of the Secret Gcod Damaru.

(Page 1B)

1 Namo Guru Sarva-Dākinī:

To the excellent Gurus and Yi dam Gods,  
(5) And to Rdo rje Phag mo, inseparable [from them],  
(4) Bowing down, I write this explanation of the ḍa ma ru  
Of the cutting-off of the Realms of the Four Demons.

Sandalwood, aloe-wood, or, also,  
Accacia, and so on;

(Page 2A)

1 whatever suits:  
This drum's basis, made from wood,  
Represents the tree-like stature of the Thought  
towards Enlightenment.

5 This hollow space, containing Emptiness,  
Represents a symbolization of the unproduced Dharma-  
Body [of a Buddha].  
And this skin which covers it  
Represents the unification of appearances and  
Emptiness.

This waistband, ornamented with small shells,  
Represents the [Buddha's] Enjoyment-Body, ornamented  
with [32] Signs and [80] Marks;

(Page 2B)

1 And the sign of these two suspended striking-pellets  
Represent unification of Method and Wisdom in the  
[Buddha's] Projection-Body.

This handgrip and shell ring, circular in shape,  
[both]

5 Represent views which are not one-sided.  
This gleaming, clear suspended mirror  
Represents meditation inseparable from Clarity and  
Emptiness.

This iron hook, suspended by a sheep's tendon,  
Represents practices which do not fall into  
[extreme] directions.

10 This suspended five-colored ribbon-banner  
Represents spontaneous attainment of the Five Goal-  
Bodies [of a Buddha].

This banner-head, which has three corners,  
Represents, through the Realm of Religion of

(Page 3A)

1 Kun tu  
Bzang mo,  
A symbol of "The Appearance of Religion Wide as the  
Heavens".

These suspended tiger and leopard skins  
Represent the subjugating force of the Heroes and  
Mkha' 'gro ma.

5 This suspended garland of bells  
Represents the sounding of the symbolic language  
of the Mkha' 'gro ma.

These suspended hairs of living and dead persons  
Represent the transcendence of Eternalism and  
Nihilism.

10 This "ringing" [the drum] with a ferocious sound  
[Represents] the empty echo that describes the Self.

(Page 3B)

1 ["...represents."; added to preceding line]

This "Len Three Beats" at the beginning  
Represents an ocean of offerings to the Gurus, Yi dam,  
and Mkha' 'gro ma.  
This "Lan Three Beats" in the middle

5 Represents subjugation [through them] of [the  
three realms of] phenomenal existence.  
This "Len Three Beats" at the end  
Represent breaking out of the pit of Cyclic Existence.  
The falling [steps] of this Nine-Beat Dance  
Represent progress to the summit of the Nine Vehicles.

(4A1) Like that sound, produced by various means,  
(10) Through the wood and skin, and through  
The mechanism of the person's hand, and so on,

(Page 4A)

(2) Is the Religion which transcends the cycle of empty  
appearances.  
It represents a demonstration of interdependence, as  
in a dream or illusion,  
Of a host of basic causes and contributory agents.

5 From the individual self-natures of these things,  
The ḍa ma ru's name and sound do not arise;  
Likewise, the Religion transcending the cycle of  
empty appearances:  
It represents Emptiness from the first beginnings  
of time.

10 The ḍa ma ru is the vagina  
Of the Secret Mate, Kun tu Bzang mo.  
The "drumstick" is Kun [tu] Bzang [po's] penis.  
Joining the beats together [is] the Bliss of Voidness.

(Page 4B)

1 ["...is."; added to preceding line]  
That sound is the Dharma-Realm's own sound;  
It is the Great Bliss which pervades Saṃsāra and  
Nirvāṇa.

5 Let the ḍa ma ru of Dharma-Realm Voidness  
Be beaten with the stick of scientific wisdom;  
In productionless space let it ring: "Khrol-lo-lo!"

Phaṭ!

This explanation of the meaning of the ḍa ma ru was  
written by the honorable 'Gyur med Blo gsal.

Bkra shis!

10 Bhavanastu!

## NOTES TO THE TRANSLATION

(Page 1A)

1 Explanation...: We have "translated" the common title-marking formula bzhugs s.ho by the equivalent English symbol, underlining the title. S.ho is a fancified spelling created by adding a ha btags to so. In the title, as in other parts of the text, ḍa (or ḍā) ma ru has been abbreviated to ḍa ru.

(Page 1B)

1 Namo...: The invocation, in Tibetan-transliterated Sanskrit, means: "Praise to the Teacher, Sarva-ḍākinī!" Sarva-ḍākinī embodies the combined nature of all ḍākinīs (Tib. Mkha' 'gro ma). See note below.

2 Yi dam: the text has Yid dam. See below.

2-5 This dedicatory stanza is rhymed, a rare practice in Tibetan poetry. In fact, most of the stanzas up to Page 4A of this book show an A-B-A-B rhyme pattern that results from the author's consistently ending his lines with 'di and brda' (later, rtags); but the A-A-B-B rhyme pattern of this stanza seems possibly more of a deliberate "poetic" choice.

2-5 Gurus, Yi dam, Rdo rje Phag mo: The "Three Roots" (rtsa gsum) of ritual practice are: Gurus (personal and lineage teachers), Yi dam (powerful meditative-ritual "deities" who stand in a teacher/helper relationship to the participant), and Mkha' 'gro ma (pronounced "Khandroma"; "Skywalkers", female celestial beings ranging from relatively minor figures to fully enlightened Buddhas). Rdo rje Phag mo, visualized in fierce form with a pig's head, represents both this third category and a form of Ma gcig Labs sgron, founder of Gcod. Ma gcig is considered the earthly emanation of Prajñāpāramitā, the Perfection of Wisdom, who, in her Dharma-Body form (see note below) is also called "Mother of All Buddhas". She appears to some in a form intermediate between her absolute and earthly forms, usually as a very powerful Mkha' 'gro ma. Different Gcod lineages and texts identify her intermediate form variously as Rdo rje Phag mo, Ye shes Mkha' 'gro ma ("Wisdom-Khandroma"), Rdo rje Rnal 'byor ma, and other important female deities.

4 Four Demons: According to the Gcod yul (3A-B), the "demons" of the four directions are Anger, Pride, Lust, and Jealousy, with a fifth, Ignorance, at the center.

7 ...and so on: sod is a common abbreviation for sogs.

(Page 2A)

2 Thought towards Enlightenment: the Byang chub kyi sems (Skt. Bodhicitta), the basic motivating concept of Mahayana Buddhism, by which one sees the necessity of becoming a Buddha in order to free all beings from suffering, and resolves to attain this goal.

5ff. Dharma-, Enjoyment-, and Projection-Bodies: A Buddha exists simultaneously in these three forms, visible respectively to other Buddhas, advanced seekers of Enlightenment, and ordinary beings. "Unproduced" means that the Dharma-Body is spontaneously achieved after proper preparation, without conscious effort and free of ordinary cause-effect processes. To one in such a perfect state, phenomenal appearances and Emptiness, the real nature of all things, are unified rather than appearing mistakenly as dualistic opposites. The Enjoyment-Body displays every possible Sign and Mark of perfection; and the Projection-Body combines Method and Wisdom to work for the good of all suffering sentient beings.

8 Waistband: This is a padded cloth band, 1-2 cm. wide, often with borders of a color that contrasts with the color of the central part of the band, which encircles the cylindrical wooden "waist" between the two hemispherical resonating chambers of the drum. Small shells are pierced and sewn to the band at intervals, often in sunburst-pattern groups of three or four (see Fig. 4).

(Page 2B)

1 Striking-pellets: The "suspended strikers" (rgyag btags) are roughly egg-shaped pellets, up to about a centimeter in length, made of compressed fabric, skin, or papier-mache, and covered with glued or sewn wrappings of cloth or skin. They are suspended by cords long enough to reach the center of either drumskin from diametrically opposite points on the waistband.

3 Handgrip and shell ring: The handgrip is a closed padded cloth loop, either forming an extension of the waistband or sewn to it. It loops around the player's palm or wrist. The shell ring is knotted to the lower end of the handgrip.

5 Mirror: Made of polished metal.

7 Iron hook: Symbolically important in many meditations and rituals involving the "capture" and "subjugation" of beings who represent opposing forces.

9-10 Banner...Goal-Bodies: The ribbon-banner (cod paṅ) is made of one ribbon of each of the primary colors (White, red, yellow, blue, green). Among the many symbolic associations of these colors, they represent the Buddhas of the five directions (listed according to color and directional coordinates in Ellingson 1974b). Thus, the "Five Goal-Bodies" of line 10 may refer to the Buddhas of the five directions. However, depending upon the system of enumeration used, the "Bodies" of a Buddha may number from two to five.

11 Banner-head: The phan mgo is made of padded cloth, often patterned or brocaded, surrounded by a contrasting-color border, and has three rounded "corners" (see Fig.4).

12 Realm of Religion: The "Realm of Dharma" or "Dharma-Realm" (Tib. Chos dbyings, Skt. Dharma-dhātu) is the all-pervading absolute dimension of reality, interpreted differently by various Buddhist traditions. In this text, its main characteristics are Emptiness, non-duality, and bliss.

(Page 3A)

1 Kun tu Bzang mo: The female counterpart and mate of the male Buddha Kun tu Bzang po, who together represent the union of Wisdom/Emptiness and Method/Compassion. According to the Rnying ma pa method of Tibetan Buddhism, he is (or they are) the central figure(s) of the Assembly-Field (tshogs zhing) of Buddhas, Yidam, Teachers, Khandromas, and protective deities, representing their combined natures in undivided form.

2 "Appearance of Religion" (chos 'byung) is used to describe a triangle enclosed in a mandala diagram; Mkha' klong probably refers to the mandala of Kun tu bzang mo.

3 Tiger and leopard skins: Procured from India and Tibet, respectively. Often replaced by strips of striped and spotted cloth.

4 Heroes: The Dpa' bo are male celestial beings who exercise protective powers on earth, and who appear with the Mkha' 'gro ma as dancers and musicians in celestial paradises.

5 Bells: "Peach-shaped" spherical metal bells with a

slit in one side and an enclosed metal pellet, suspended from the phan mgo.

7 Hairs: cut off and tied in two bundles.

8 Eternalism and Nihilism: The views that things either exist permanently or cease to exist absolutely, two philosophical "extremes" rejected by Buddhism.

9 "Ringing": See page 74 above.

(Page 3B)

2-6 "Len (Lan) Three Beats": Three complete clockwise-counter-clockwise oscillations of the drum, producing six actually-sounded beats, with the fourth hit harder than the others. Len (Lan) usually refers to an introductory beat or beats played before the three main beats.

5 Phenomenal existence: Composed of the three realms or levels of the Desire-World, Form-World, and Formless-World.

7 Cyclic Existence: The Cycle (Tib. 'Khor ba, Skt. Samsāra) is the eternal path followed by all sentient beings from birth to suffering to death to rebirth. The Cycle can only be transcended by attaining the Enlightenment of a Buddha.

8 Nine-Beat Dance: A special dance with nine-step patterns performed in Gcod ritual.

9 Nine Vehicles: Nine pathways or stages of Buddhist practice, according to the teachings of the Rnying ma pa. They are listed by Tucci (1970: 94).

10ff. "Like that sound...": This argument (from here to Page 4A, line 8) presents 'Gyur med Blo gsal's reformulation of a classic Buddhist analogy. All of the Indian schools of Buddhism used the example of the process of sound production by musical instruments to demonstrate the complex cause-and-effect nature of phenomenal existence and the human personality, and to argue that the "real" nature of anything does not reside in any of its material elements, causes, or contributory agents. In Indian texts, the instrument discussed is usually the vinā. 'Gyur med Blo gsal here applies this type of analysis and argument to sound production by the da ma ru, emphasizing the Perfection of Wisdom school's central concept of Emptiness.

11 Mechanism of the person's hand...: Members of Rnying



ma pa performing traditions ordinarily play the ḍa ma ru by movement only of the thumb and forefinger. However, since the ḍa ma ru used in Gcod is so large, it is usually played by oscillating the whole hand.

(Page 4A)

4 Causes...agents: In the Tibetan instrument classification system, the ḍa ma ru is normally classed as 'khrol ba, a "Rung" instrument, in contrast to other drums, which are brdung ba, "Beaten". The larger Gcod ḍa ma ru may be placed in the latter category. However, as we have seen, the instrument can in fact be played either in "ringing" or "beat" styles. The author argues here that its true method of sound production is by rgyu rkyen, "cause-and-agent". This is the method of sound production employed by stringed instruments, and one of two alternate names for the category they represent (page 74 above).

9ff. Vagina...penis...Bliss: In Tantric Buddhism, sexual union symbolizes the "Bliss" of Enlightenment, which unites both phenomenal existence (Samsāra) and Transcendence (Nirvāṇa). A physical "drumstick" is not used.

(Page 4B)

6 Khrol-lo-lo: Onomatopoeic words, pronounced "ṭ<sup>h</sup>lo-lo" (retroflex aspirated t), used in Tibetan poetry to represent a "ringing" sound. The English "ring-a-ling" is an approximately parallel expression.

7 Phaṭ: Fierce mantra ("p<sup>h</sup>e") used extensively in Gcod ritual.

9-10 Bkra shis and Bhavanastu: Tibetan and Sanskrit closing formulas, expressing the wish that happiness may arise; i.e., for all sentient beings because of the composition of this book.

#### EXTRA NOTE

Because our purpose has been to make 'Gyur med Blo gsal's symbolic treatise accessible to readers interested in both music and Tibetan and Buddhist studies, the above explanations have been stated as simply as possible. In particular, many of the Buddhist concepts which we discuss in a few words are the subjects of extensive bodies of literary analysis. For readers unfamiliar with Buddhist concepts, we suggest consulting a good basic survey, such as Robinson (1970) or Conze (1951). The most extensive

survey in a Western language of the development of Buddhist thought and ritual in Tibet is Tucci (1970). Readers unfamiliar with the technical terminology of musical instrument description may wish to consult Sachs (1940: 454ff.).

## APPENDIX

### Tibetan text of the Explanation of the Secret Gcod Da ma ru

(Page 1A)

Gsang gcod da ru'i bshad pa bzhugs s.ho/

(Page 1B)

- 1 Na mo Gu ru Sa rva dā kki ni/  
Bla ma mchog dang Yid dam lha/  
dbyer med Rdo rje Phag mo la/  
btud nas bdud bzhi dbyings gcod kyi/  
5 dā ma ru yi bshad pa 'bri/  
tsan ldan a ka ru dang ni/  
seng ldeng la soḍ

(Page 2A)

- 1 dā rgyu shing las gang yang rung/  
Byang sems gdong po tshugs pa'i brda'//  
khog pa stong par yod pa 'di/  
5 Chos sku skye med mtshon pa'i brda'//  
de la lpags pa g.yogs pa 'di/  
snang stong zung du 'jug pa'i brda'//  
sked chings mgron bus spras pa 'di/  
Longs sku mtshan dpes brgyan pa'i brda'//

(Page 2B)

- 1 rgyag btags gnyis kyi mtshan pa 'di/  
Sprul sku thabs shes zung 'jug brda'//  
lag gdan dung long 'khor ba 'di/  
lta ba phyogs ris med pa'i brda'//  
5 dangs gsal me long rtags pa 'di/  
sgom pa gsal stong dbyer med brda'//

lug rgyud nyag thag lcags kyu 'di/  
spyod pa phyogs lhung bral ba'i brda'/  
10 cod pan sna lnga rtags pa 'di/  
'Bras bu sku lnga lhun grub brda'/'

Phan mgo zur gsum yod pa 'di/  
Chos dbyings

(Page 3A)

1 Kun tu bzang mo yis/  
mkha' klong chos 'byung mtshon pa'i brda'/'

stag lpags gzig lpags rtags pa 'di/  
5 Dpa'o Mkha' 'gro dbang bsdud brda'/'  
dril bu g.yer kha rtags pa 'di/  
Mkha' 'gro'i brda' skad sgrog pa'i rtags/'

shi skra gson skra rtags pa 'di/  
rtag chad gnyis las 'das pa'i rtags/  
10 sgra skad drag pos khrol ba 'di/  
grag stong rang ngo sprod pa'i

(Page 3B)

1 steng du len gsum brdung ba 'di/  
rtags//  
Rtsa gsum rgya mtsho mchod pa'i rtags/  
bar du lan gsum brdung ba 'di/  
5 snang srid dbang du bsdu ba'i rtags/'

'og tu len gsum brdung ba 'di/  
'khor ba dong nas sprug pa'i rtags/  
dgu brdung cham gcig 'bebs pa 'di/  
Theg dgu'i rtse mor phyin pa'i rtags/'

10 sgra de shing dang lpags pa dang/  
skyes bu'i lag gi 'khrul 'khor sogs/  
sna tshogs

(Page 4A)

1 thabs las 'byung ba ltar/  
med bzhin snang ba'i 'khor 'das chos/  
rten 'brel rmi lam sgyu ma tsam/  
rgyu rkyen tshod las ston pa'i brda'/'

5 de rnams rang rang ngo bo la/  
dā ru'i ming dang skad mi 'byung/  
de bzhin med snang 'khor 'das chos//  
ye ga'i gdod nas stong pa'i brda'/'



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