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Tibetan Religion and the Senses

edited by James D. Gentry



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Tibetan religion and the senses

Introduction

James Gentry

(University of Virginia)

The senses, as the very foundation of our experience of the world, fundamentally shape our sense of reality and mediate our relationships with other people, places, and things. In recent decades the sensorial turn in the social sciences and the humanities has shown that the senses are not simply the neutral effect of biological and neurological processes, but are also constructed—historically, culturally, and politically.¹ This acknowledgment of diverse human sensoria has found expression in the study of religion in a re-sensualization of traditional fields of inquiry. The religious body, material sacra, sacred landscape, and other themes that were typically sidelined in the study of religion have now come to the fore as researchers newly inquire into the diverse sensory regimes and rationales operative throughout the world’s religious practices and beliefs.² This new focus indeed signals a sharp turn from the previous emphasis in religious studies, which tended to “privilege spirit above matter, belief above ritual, content above form, mind above body, and inward contemplation above ‘mere’ outward action.”³

¹ For a rich description of the state of the field of “sensory studies,” including an extensive bibliography of relevant publications up to the year 2013, see David Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies”, *Sensory Studies*, 2013, <https://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/>. Important instances of this impulse are Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London, Routledge, 1993) and David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 2003).

² Important examples include Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Graham Harvey and Jessica Hughes (ed.), *Sensual Religion: Religion and the Five Senses* (Sheffield, UK; Bristol, CT, Equinox Publishing, 2018).

³ Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, “Introduction: Material Religion—How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, 1–23 (New York, Fordham University Press, 2012): 1.

In the study of Tibetan religion, and the study of Buddhism more broadly, the sensory turn has been slow to gain traction. This stagnation is perhaps due to lingering perceptions of Buddhist traditions as fundamentally world abnegating and therefore dismissive of rich attention to sensory experience. But encounters with Buddhist societies, and Tibetan Buddhist societies in particular, immediately confront the visitor with a profusion of aesthetic forms, ranging from protective cords, relic pills, amulets, and other portable sacra, to masked dances, statues, *stūpas*, temples, and sacred caves, mountains, and other pilgrimage sites. Such encounters give the distinct impression that it is these expressive forms, with their capacity to captivate and enthrall the senses, that are the preeminent features of Tibetan religious life, above and beyond whatever it is Tibetans profess to believe.

But sacred sensory objects and the power of sensory encounters with them have also been an explicit focus of Buddhist doctrinal thinking for centuries. For Tibetan intellectuals who inherited Indian Buddhist discourses, the senses and sensory objects have been productive not only for figuring experiences of the sacred for the populace. They have also been important focal points to think through. Tibetan religious thinkers have formulated and argued over a diversity of opinions concerning the roles of the senses in religious life. Equally if not more diverse have been the Tibetan religious liturgical and narrative attempts to work through the sensory lives of their audiences of spectators, performers, and readers to bring about a wide spectrum of effects.

This special issue of *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* is the first concerted attempt to study Tibetan religion from the perspective of sensory studies.⁴ It considers the roles of the senses in Tibetan religion from a diversity of vantage points, exploring how the senses figure in both the Bon and Buddhist traditions through focused studies that range across philosophical, liturgical, and narrative literary genres, and ethnographic fieldwork settings.

This issue owes its inception to the panel, "Religion and the Senses," held at the 15th IATS conference in Bergen, Norway, in June 2016. This panel was organized through the funding of the KHK "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe," at CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany by Carmen Meinert, Cathy Cantwell, and Robert Mayer. After the idea was hatched to

⁴ It would be remiss in this regard not to mention the pioneering work of Robert Desjarlais, *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths Among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), which marks the first sustained inquiry into the sensorial lives of Himalayan Buddhists.

organize the panel papers into a volume, additional contributors were called upon to complete the issue. It is hoped that this effort might help spark similar research projects focused on the senses in Tibetan religion.



Throughout most considerations of the nature and role of the senses in Tibetan religion there is a palpable tension: how have Tibetan religious traditions positively enlisted the senses given the premium placed in Buddhist traditions in particular on cultivating a strong sense of disenchantment with sensory involvements as a precondition for realizing the ultimate reality of emptiness, often construed as utterly beyond the confines of sensory experience. The senses are thus paradoxically framed in Tibetan religious traditions as fundamentally deceptive, but also as the only tangible raw materials which practitioners have to work with in their spiritual pursuits. This tension is often expressed in terms of a disjunction between how we perceive the world (*snang tshul*) and the way things actually are (*gnas tshul*). From this perspective, the entire Buddhist (and Bon) path is devoted to resolving the friction between these two modalities, such that personal perception and ultimate reality fuse in the realization of final awakening.

Out of this friction between deceptive and illusory sensory perception, on the one hand, and the shear necessity of using the senses to pursue any path of action—be it mundane, or spiritual—on the other, there has arisen a variety of ways to construe the roles of the senses in Buddhist practice. This variety has in turn been productive of considerable doctrinal thinking, ritual innovation, and narrative exploration.

1. Doctrine

In doctrinal terms, Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (fl. 11th–12th c.) considered this friction between phenomenal experience and ultimate reality as the key to structuring all the diverse approaches of Buddhist theory and practice. His *Black Snake Summary* (*sBrul nag po'i stong thun*) takes different perspectives on phenomenal experience—figured in the image of different attitudes that arise upon encountering the reflection of a black snake on water—as the basis for proposing a doxographical hierarchy of five different Buddhist approaches to

reality.⁵ At the most rudimentary level is the Śrāvaka approach, which construes the reflection as real and, out of fear, advocates its rejection. Next is the Madhyamaka approach, which understands that the reflection is not a real snake, but also understands that the reflection can nonetheless perform some function—i.e., to terrify others—and thus advocates the application of antidotes to its perception. Third is the tantric approaches of Kriyā and Yoga, which, like the Madhyamaka approach, recognize full well that the reflection is not a real snake, but take this recognition a step further to acknowledge that as a reflection it also has no capacity to perform any function. Nonetheless, out of force of habit, there is still trepidation to reach out and touch the reflection for confirmation. The fourth approach is that of the tantric Mahāyoga tradition. Here, in addition to the recognition of the reflection for what it is and the consequent acknowledgement that it can be no harm, there is also the compulsion to force oneself to reach out and touch the reflection, with the aim of dispelling the irrational fear once and for all. Finally, we reach the pinnacle of perspectives for Rong zom, that of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). Here, with the full recognition of the reflection of the snake on water for what it truly is—simply a reflection—there is no reactive impulse to reject or take up anything whatsoever, and hence no effort is directed toward anything. When considering this diversity of perspectives concerning the black snake's reflection it becomes abundantly clear that Tibetan religious traditions influenced by Buddhism have a wide repertoire of doctrinal resources with which to construe the role of the senses and sensory experience in the pursuit of the religious life.

Jiri Holba, in the first article in the present special issue, presents the basic conceptual building blocks that Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal thinkers like Rong zom and others drew from when considering the roles of the senses in Buddhist practice. Holba outlines the standard taxonomies and philosophical intricacies of what, precisely, constitutes the sense organs, sense objects, sense consciousnesses, and their interrelations according to the abhidharma theories most famously formulated by Vasubandhu. Holba also traces these themes in the abhidharma writings of the rNying ma scholar Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), the Madhyamaka analysis of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), and basic *pramāṇa* theory to outline the rich avenues of speculation that occupied Tibet's foremost doctrinal

⁵ Rong zom Chos kyi zang po, *sBrul nag po'i stong thun*, in *Roñ zom bka' 'bum: A Collection of Writings by Roñ-zom Chos-kyi-bzañ-po* (Thimpu, Kunsang Topgay, 1976): 445–452.

theorists. These notions have proven extremely influential in the domain of tantric ritual practice.

2. *Ritual and contemplation*

As suggested by Rong zom's *Black Snake Summary*, and as evident in even a superficial encounter with lived Tibetan religious traditions, the sense faculties and their associated sensory objects also form an explicit focal point in tantric ritual proceedings and contemplative practices. Indeed, Tibetan tantric traditions—both Buddhist and Bon—possess a repertoire of techniques through which they aim to instill a particularly tantric orientation toward the senses and sensory objects. Broadly speaking, tantric ritual shares with mainstream Buddhist doctrine the underlying premise that ordinary sentient life can be characterized in terms of dissonances between how things seem—the epistemological dimension of sensory experience, representation, and signification—and how things really are—the ontological domain of reality and presence. The putative ultimate goal of Buddhist tantric practice is also to overcome these dissonances, such that personal perception and absolute being fuse in a final dissolution of subject/object duality (*gzung 'dzin bral ba'i ye shes*). But tantric traditions lift this aim into a resolutely embodied, enacted, and sensory-saturated environment. Furthermore, until the time when practitioners actualize non-dual gnosis, Buddhist tantric rituals present an array of techniques, with a variety of pragmatic and soteriological objectives, which play with the tensions between sensory representation and reality, signification and presence—but with all the color, flare, and pageantry of a theatrical drama.

This active engagement with the dissonances between perception and reality is also expressed in Buddhist tantric ritual and contemplation in terms of the tensions we often feel between pretense and sincerity, or make believe and literality as opposing orientations to action and interaction. As tantric rituals captivate the senses through the music, movements, accoutrements, smells, colors, textures, and tastes of their baroque ceremonials, they evocatively beckon us to “imagine” (*mos*) our personal selves, sensory interactive field, and surrounding environments as none other than the ultimate mode of reality itself. This is to be accomplished foremost by the deity-yoga contemplative techniques—reflected in the sensory-saturated spaces of ritual precincts—of meticulously mapping the physical elements, psychophysical aggregates, sense faculties, sense objects, sense consciousnesses, and their convergence—all the categories of person and world presented in abhidharma—to a pantheon of awakened beings imagined within the configuration of a visualized

maṇḍala palace and its surrounding pure land. This detailed identification of divinized values with the functional constituents of one's personality complex and sensory interactive field is intended to produce a complete shift in orientation from ordinary "I" to awakened "I." By attuning sensory perception to the ultimate mode of being, this imaginative act brings that reality into presence, particularly when yoked to ritual settings—even while, as imagination, it also signals our perceptual distance from truly experiencing it as an abiding actuality. Thus, rather than "signify" some other, as yet unrealized reality, Buddhist tantric ritual and contemplation works by bringing that reality into experience. In this way, tantric rituals and contemplative practices give the palpable sense of collapsing, if only temporarily, the dissonances between one's own particular perceptual inclinations and the awakened nature of ultimate reality itself. The next series of articles in the present special issue each touch upon one or another aspect of how such tantric rituals and contemplative practices work with the senses.

Robert Mayer considers how Indian Buddhist doctrinal understandings and literary features concerning the senses, particularly those derived from Mahāyoga tantric traditions, interact with resolutely indigenous Tibetan imagery in the Bon figure Khu tsha zla 'od's *Black Pillar* tantra. He argues that by carefully combining these distinct features Khu tsha zla 'od's work manages to structure indigenous images according to a tantric Buddhist soteriological framework, maintaining the facade of Bon identity in what is otherwise a roundly Buddhist set of conceptions.

Carmen Meinert examines Chinese Karakhoto ritual manuals centering on the Buddhist goddess Vajravārāhī to show how these call upon tantric Buddhist practitioners to sense their bodies and worlds anew, utilizing the senses of sight and taste in particular as potent media of interaction with the goddess. In so doing, Meinert demonstrates how these manuals' enlistment of the senses quickens the imagination for further such interactions.

James Gentry examines a liturgical text composed by 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) that presents eleven different techniques to gain "liberation" through encounters with a diversity of potent sensory objects. In outlining the features of each technique, he suggests that Kong sprul's text is the continuation of a centuries-long process of systematizing Buddhist sensory practices that first began in India, and was developed further in Tibet, but with a few novel twists.

Katarina Turpeinen also explores liberation through the senses practices, but focuses instead on the role of the senses of sight, hearing, and touch in the practices of direct transcendence and liberation

through wearing from the Great Perfection cycle of the illustrious Treasure revealer Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (1337–1408). Turpeinen shows how these and other sense-based practices connect with broader Great Perfection conceptions of subtle physiology, cosmogony, and instantaneous liberation to promote a much more positive view of the role of sensory perception in Buddhist practice than those found in most other schools of Buddhist thought and practice.

Cathy Cantwell presents the results of her ethnographic observations of the “imbibing siddhis” ceremony performed in the context of a Major Practice Session held in Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan, in 2013. Cantwell combines her fieldwork data with her study of the liturgy and its broader literary and ritual context to show how, at every stage of this rite aimed at attaining the loftiest of all Buddhist spiritual goals, the senses are nonetheless evoked, making for a fully embodied sensual experience.

Anna Sehnova examines through ethnographic observations of a performance of the Bon po *light-swirled sman sgrub* liturgy, together with detailed analysis of the liturgical text and medicinal recipe text, how the senses provide the underlying organizational rubric for the concoction and ritual accomplishment of this rite’s accomplished medicine. Sehnova shows that the Bon po ritual production of this medicinal substance brings together Buddhist philosophical concepts and Tibetan medical understandings of sensory categories, embedding these in tantric ritual and contemplative practice, and thereby materialization them in the form of powerful medicine that operates equally on both the physical and the spiritual levels.

3. Narrative

As hinted at in Rong zom’s use of narrative in his *Black Snake Summary*, narratives also work with the senses, but in ways that can sometimes be different from how they figure in Tibetan religious doctrine and ritual, even as they may share thematic focus and language. For instance, although narratives, much like rituals, can help inculcate particular orientations with respect to the senses and sensory experience, narratives can also allow for more room to negotiate the thorny ethical ambiguities of the felt tensions between how things seem and how they really are.

Natasha Mikles explores this dynamic through comparing the story of Gesar’s trip to hell to visit his deceased mother, as narrated in the *dMyal gling*, with the “outer preliminary practices” section of the famous *sngon 'gro* instruction manual *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. Mikles shows that although this Gesar narrative clearly drew language and imagery from the *sngon 'gro* manual, as narrative it also worked

quite differently on its readers by allowing for the experience, expression, and perhaps also the resolution of emotions that might be unacceptable in the context of standard *sngon 'gro* instruction and training. Mikles argues that the Gesar narrative pushes beyond *sngon 'gro* in its power to form ethical agents by raising difficult questions about the difference between knowing doctrine intellectually and experiencing it directly through the senses.

Ana Cristina Lopes comparatively examines two intriguing episodes—one historical and one contemporary—in the interaction of Tibetan lamas with their students and the wider populace—to explore how through the person of the lama the senses and emotions figure in the expansion of senses of personhood and self beyond the private, subjective sphere. Lopes proposes that the dynamics of the plasticity of personhood observed in these two accounts are illustrative of a structural pattern endemic to much of Tibetan religion.



The senses in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism from a philosophical perspective

Jiri Holba

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The distinguished contemporary philosopher J. McDowell holds that perceptual experience is a form of “openness to the world”.¹ Others have argued that “perceptual experience, in its character, involves the presentation (as) of ordinary mind-independent objects to a subject, and such objects are experienced as *present* or *there* such that the character of experience is immediately responsive to the character of its objects.”² But, as J. Ganeri writes, according to Buddhism “perception of objects is itself a rational activity. One does not, properly speaking, perceive objects at all, but only patterns of colour, sound, touch, smell and taste. From their sequence in time and arrangement in space, one infers the presence of an object of one kind or another. Reason here is a mental faculty of construction, synthesis and superimposition. It brings order to the array of sensory data.”³

With this framework in view, this article addresses how Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers understand the way in which perceptions, sensations, and the senses provide knowledge or justified beliefs about the world. The basis of this investigation was a view that there is no substantial, enduring, and independent Self (*ātman*; *bdag*) and that “human beings are reducible to the physical and psychological constituents and processes which comprise them”.⁴

The first part of the article details the Buddhist philosophical analysis of the individual into five classes of physical and mental events, or aggregates (*skandha*; *phung po*). It subsequently discusses an alternative categorization, which holds that the individual comprises twelve sense-spheres or sense-fields (*āyatana*; *skye mched*), i.e. the six senses (*indriya*; *dbang po*), including the five physical senses and mind, and six classes of sense objects (*viśaya*; *yul*). Another variation that is examined understands the person as consisting of eighteen sense elements (*dhātu*; *khams*), i.e. six senses, six classes of sense objects, and six classes of sense-consciousness (*viññāna*; *rnam shes*). I concentrate here mainly on chapters I and II of Vasubandhu’s (fl. 4th to 5th century

¹ McDowell 1994: 111.

² Crane and Craig 2017.

³ Ganeri 2001: 17.

⁴ Ibid.

CE) influential Sanskrit text *Commentary on the Treasury of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*), which was a key work that shaped Tibetan discourse on this issue.

The second part of the paper analyses the classification and characterization of the senses (*dbang po*), sense-fields (*skye mched*), sense-consciousness (*rnam shes*), sense-spheres (*kham*s), and aggregates (*phung po*) articulated by the great Nyingma scholar Mipham Rinpoche (1846–1912 CE) in his scholastic manual *The Gate for Entering the Way of a Pandita* (*mKhas pa'i tshul la jug pa'i sgo*).⁵

The third part of the article addresses the sophisticated account evident in Tsongkhapa's *Ocean of Reasoning* (*rTsa she tik chen rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*), which is a commentary on Nāgārjuna's (ca. 150 CE) key work *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. I focus here on Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419 CE) interpretation and discussion of the third chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that is entitled "An Analysis of the sense-spheres" (*āyatanaparīkṣā*). In this section of the text, Nāgārjuna refutes the view of the Sarvāstivāda abhidharma scholastic tradition⁶ that the twelve *āyatanas* are ultimately real since they have an inherent nature (*svabhāva*; *rang bzhin*). Nāgārjuna argues that all the *āyatanas* are empty (*śūnya*; *stong pa*) of an inherent nature, not unlike all of phenomenality.

The fourth part, which is quite short, concerns the concept of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*; *mngon sum*) as a source of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*; *tshad ma*), which played a key role in Buddhist epistemology. This part includes Mipham's characterization of the four types of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*).

1. The role of senses in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh)

*tassāhaṃ vacanaṃ sutvā khandhe āyatāni ca
dhātuyo ca viditvāna pabbajim anāgiriyaṃ*

"Having heard (the Buddha's) word and learnt of the aggregates, bases, and elements, I went forth into homelessness."⁷

The main Buddhist soteriological project is to examine the world and see how things really are (*yathābhūtatadarśana*) to escape from the miserable cycle of continuous rebirth (*saṃsāra*; *'khor ba*), and thus get rid of the frustration, unsatisfactoriness and suffering (*duḥkha*; *sdug*

⁵ *mKhas 'jug*: ff. 148–161b.

⁶ Abhidharma (*chos mngon pa*), "higher" or "further" doctrine (*dharmā*), is (1) the set of texts that make up the *Abhidharmapiṭaka*, the third basket of the Buddhist Canon, (2) the very sophisticated system of texts and commentaries (1st BCE–2nd century CE) which is a systematic arrangement, clarification and classification of the Buddha's doctrine (*dharmā*; *chos*).

⁷ *Theragāthā*, 1255.

bsngal) of existence. Buddhism therefore breaks down all reality, seemingly firm and relatively stable, into processes and changes. According to Buddhist thought, which is especially elaborate in the abhidharma metaphysics, the whole of reality is made up of “the elements of existence” (*dharmā; chos*). *Dharmas* are the ultimate ontological realities and can be characterised as “the basic qualities, both mental and physical, that in some sense constitute experience or reality in its entirety”.⁸

Nearly all *dharmas*, which are classified into different categories, are impermanent (*anitya; mi rtag pa*), painful (*duḥkha; sdug bsngal*) and selfless (*anātman; bdag med*). This is important from the soteriological point of view because watching *dharmas* in the meditation of insight (*vipaśyanā; lhag mthong*), that should be done without any attachment or clinging (*upādāna; len pa*), leads to the very deep experience of peace, awakening (*bodhi; byang chub*), and *nirvāṇa* (*mya ngan las 'das pa*), the final goal of Buddhist path.⁹

There are three schemes for classifying the *dharmas*, which constitute the whole of reality including human beings: (1) the concept of five aggregates (*skandha*), (2) the twelve bases (*āyatana*) and (3) the eighteen elements (*dhātu*). We start this triad with a concept of five aggregates, where each aggregate generally represents “a complex class of phenomena that is continuously arising and falling away into processes of consciousness (*vijñāna; rnam shes*) based on the six spheres of sense”.¹⁰ According to Gethin, the concern in Pali suttas and early abhidharma “is not so much presentation of an analysis of man as object, but rather the understanding of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject”.¹¹

But it is not exactly correct to speak here about an “experiencing subject” as Gethin does. According to Buddhist philosophers the inner states of the person have a fleeting nature (compare Hume’s questioning of permanent “Self”)¹² and, therefore, there could not be a subject of experience because this claim necessarily leads to the concept of the Self. Buddhist philosophers used different strategies in their attempt to prove that “there is no entity that might serve as the referent of ‘I’ and to explain how the belief that there is such an entity

⁸ Gethin 2004a: 537.

⁹ Gethin 2004b: 215.

¹⁰ Gethin 1986: 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception” (Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.6.3).

might have arisen"; one of these concepts was the idea that "there is subjectivity but no subject".¹³

1.a. Aggregates (*skandha*)

Buddhism analyzed the individual into a flowing, still changing, but uninterrupted causal continuum (*saṃtāna*; *rgyun*, *rgyud*) composed of interdependently arising *dharmas* or causally connected five aggregates (*skandha*; *phung po*). They are inextricably linked to each other due to the causal principle of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*; *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*) and create living being or psychophysical personality in its unity called "mind and matter" (*nāmarūpa*, lit. "name-form"; *ming gzugs*).¹⁴

five aggregates (<i>skandha</i>)
(1) material form (<i>rūpa</i> ; <i>gzugs</i>)
(2) feelings or sensation (<i>vedanā</i> ; <i>tshor ba</i>)
(3) perception (<i>saṃjñā</i> ; <i>'du shes</i>)
(4) volitions or dispositional formations (<i>saṃskāra</i> ; <i>'du byed</i>)
(5) consciousness or awareness (<i>vijñāna</i> ; <i>rnam shes</i>)

The five *skandhas* are defined in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* as follows:

(1) The *skandha* of material form (*rūpaskandha*) consists of:

(a) Five sense organs (*indriya*), i.e. the eye (*caḥsur*; *mig*), the ear (*śrotra*; *rna ba*), the nose (*ghrāṇa*; *sna*), the tongue (*jihvā*; *lce*), and the body (*kāya*; *lus*).

(b) Five sense objects: visible matter (*rūpa*; *gzugs*), sound (*śabda*; *sgra*), smell (*gandha*; *dri*) taste (*rasa*; *ro*), and tangible things (*spraṣṭavya*; *reg bya*) (*AKBh* 1.9).

(c) Unmanifest or imperceptible form (*avijñaptirūpa*; *rnam par rig byed ma yin pa'i gzugs*; *AKBh* 1.11). This eleventh category of *rūpaskandha* is a special kind of materiality (*rūpa*) which is very subtle. It is something like a sign of *karman* and, according to the Sarvāstivāda school, it may or may not be connected with other *rūpadharmas*. It comes into existence dependent on the four great elements of which the material world including *rūpaskandha* is composed (*mahābhūta*; *'byung ba chen po*), i.e. earth, water, fire, and wind.

¹³ Siderits et al (eds.) 2011: 5, 18.

¹⁴ Unanimated things like rocks, trees or tables have only material form (*rūpa*), while human beings (including animals) have also mental "life" which is created by the four remaining *skandhas* and described as "name" (*nāma*).

Unmanifest form could be *karmically* wholesome (*kuśala*) or unwholesome (*akuśala*) because it depends on the intention (*cetanā*) of a person who is going to do some action (*karman*; *AKBh* 4.4–7).¹⁵

(2) The *skandha* of feelings or sensation (*vedanā*) is threefold: painful (*duḥkha*), pleasant (*sukha*) and neutral, i.e. “neither-painful-nor-pleasant” (*aduḥkhāsukha*). Again, this *skandha* can be divided into six classes, corresponding to the feelings which result from the contact (*sparśa*; *reg pa*) of sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) with their objects (*viśaya*) (*AKBh* 1.14). Feelings can be “corporeal” through the sense organs, or “mental” through the mind (*manas*, *citta*; *jid*, *sems*).

According to Buddhism the mind is a sixth sense organ which can be controlled and developed like the other senses. The difference between the mind as a sensory organ and, for example, the eye is that the eye can experience only the world of colours and visible forms, while the mind experiences the world of ideas, thoughts and mental subjects. The eye can see only what is visible, the ear can hear only what is audible, etc., while the mind seizes both its objects and the objects of the other five senses, as well as these senses themselves.¹⁶

(3) The *skandha* of perception (*saṃjñā*; ‘*du shes*) is an aggregate of ideas which grasps (*udgrahaṇa*) special signs (*nimitta*; *mtshan ma*) of phenomenal objects such as blue, yellow, long, short, male, female, friend, enemy, and so on (*AKBh* 1.14).¹⁷ Like the *skandha* of feelings (*vedanā*), it appears through the contact of internal sense-organs with the external sense-objects which are grasped, recognized, classified, and interpreted by our senses and mind.¹⁸ But according to the commentaries the perception of “blue”, for instance, is “not so much a passive awareness of visual sensation we subsequently agree to call “blue”, but rather the *active noting of that sensation*, and the recognising of it as “blue”—that is, more or less, the idea of “blueness”.¹⁹

Saṃjñā is caused by many factors, such as memories, expectations, dispositions, etc., and could be, according to Coseru, broadly

¹⁵ Intention (*cetanā*) “creates an ‘unmanifest’ type of materiality (*avijñaptirūpa*) that imprints itself on the person as either bodily or verbal information... Unmanifest materiality is the ‘glue’ that connects the intention that initiates action with the physical act itself” (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 86). The intention is a very important mental activity because it generates wholesome, unwholesome or indifferent *karman*. “Volition, monks, I declare to be *kamma*” (*cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*) *Aṅguttaranikāya*, VI.63.

¹⁶ *Saṃyuttanikāya*, III.59–60, 86–87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II.123.

¹⁸ Gethin 1986: 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

compared to the Aristotelian concept of *sensus communis*, the general faculty of sense that unites the sensations of all senses into a “coherent representation of the object”; or it could be broadly understood as similar to Kant’s notion of the transcendental unity of apperception.²⁰ This faculty of “apperception” (*die Apperzeption*) is, according to Kant, active and brings about “the unity of this synthesis [of the various sensory materials]” (*Pure Reason*, A 94) and makes out of all appearances “a connection or coherence according to laws” (*Pure Reason*, A 108).²¹

(4) The *skandha* of volitions (*saṃskāra*; ‘*du byed*) is different from all other *skandhas* (*AKBh* 1.15). It includes six types of volitional states (*cetanā*) that are related to visual objects, sounds, odours, tastes, bodily impressions, and mental objects. *Saṃskāras* include everything that is conditioned (*saṃskṛta*; ‘*du byed*); i.e. *dharma*s that are in various combinations intrinsic to consciousness (*cittasaṃprayukta*), as well as *dharma*s that are dissociated from consciousness (*cittaviprayukta*). The most important *dharma* in this aggregate is volition (*cetanā*; see above). There are wholesome *dharma*s, such as faith, respect, fear, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, effort, etc.; unwholesome *dharma*s, such as desire, hatred, pride, ignorance, anger, envy, etc.; and indeterminate *dharma*s, such as regret, sleep, reasoning, and investigation, etc.

(5) The *skandha* of awareness or consciousness (*viññāna*; *rnam shes*) is characterised as seeing “what is recognized through differentiation” (*viññānaṃ prativiññaptiḥ*). Awareness is defined as the impression (*viññapti*) of each object (*viṣaya*) or as bare grasping (*upalabdhi*) of each object. It consists of six classes (*AKBh* 1.16): visual awareness (*caḥsurviññāna*), auditory awareness (*śrotraviññāna*), olfactory awareness (*ghrānaviññāna*), awareness of taste (*jihvaviññāna*), awareness of touch (*kāyaviññāna*) and mental awareness (*manoviññāna*). For instance, when visual awareness (*caḥsurviññāna*) apprehends colours (blue etc.) and shapes it is called mental perception (*saṃjñā*) because it apprehends certain characteristics (*nimitta*) of the sense object.

It has to be noted that only *rūpaskandha* is a physical aggregate as such because the other four aggregates, i.e. sensation, perception, volition, and awareness, are—according to the abhidharma’s analysis—mental factors (*caitta*). When we compare *rūpaskandha* with contemporary philosophy, “the empirical approach that characterizes the Buddhist analysis of materiality does not imply physicalism, at

²⁰ Coseru 2017: 13.

²¹ Kitcher 2007: 184. But it has to be noted that, unlike *saṃjñā*, Kant’s transcendental apperception, which is uniquely capable of representing all objects, is pure, original, and immutable (!) consciousness (Kant, *Pure Reason*, A 107).

least not in the sense that everything is or supervenes on the physical. Rather, materiality is analyzed as being reducible to the phenomenal content of experience. Thus, the formal properties of material objects are analyzed either in terms of how they are impacted by contact or as factors that oppose resistance.”²²

1.b. Bases (*āyatana*)

The second classification of *dharmas* is their sorting out into twelve bases (*āyatana*, “place of entry”) of cognition, or bases (*āyatana*) for a production of consciousness (*vijñāna*). The term *āyatana* etymologically means “entrance”, i.e. “that extends (*tanoti*) the entry (*āyam*) of the mind (*citta*) and its mental states (*caitta*)” (AKBh 1.16). It is important to note here that the three terms *manas* (“mental faculty,” “mind”), *citta* (“mind,” “thought”), and *vijñāna* (“consciousness,” “discernment”), which designate mental reality or processes, i.e. “mind”, are near synonyms in early Buddhist texts and Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*.²³

six internal bases (<i>adhyātmāyatana</i>)	six external bases (<i>bāhyāyatana</i>)
1. faculty of eye (<i>cakṣurindriya</i>)	7. forms (<i>rūpāyatana</i>)
2. faculty of ear (<i>śrotrendriya</i>)	8. sounds (<i>śabdāyatana</i>)
3. faculty of nose (<i>ghrāṇendriya</i>)	9. odours (<i>ghrāṇāyatana</i>)
4. faculty of tongue (<i>jihvendriya</i>)	10. tastes (<i>rasāyatana</i>)
5. faculty of touch (<i>kāyendriya</i>)	11. tangible objects (<i>spraṣṭavyāyatana</i>) ²⁴
6. faculty of mind (<i>manendriya</i>)	12. mental objects (<i>dharmāyatana</i>)

The bases are characterised as internal (*adhyātmāyatana*) or external (*bāhyāyatana*, *viśaya*). The six external bases are something like a cognitive support for the six sense faculties.

1.c. Elements (*dhātu*)

This third classification of *dharmas*, which is done from the point of view of the theory of cognition, is their division into eighteen elements (*dhātu*). In AKBh 1.20 Vasubandhu calls the term *dhātu* “lineage” or “family” (*gotra*). Just as there are many “families” of gems, like copper,

²² Coseru 2017: 14.

²³ “*Citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna* have the same meaning (*artha*). It is *citta* because it accumulates (*cinoti*). It is *manas* because it thinks (*manute*). It is *vijñāna* because it distinguishes (its objects; *vijānāti*)” AKBh 2.34.

²⁴ The bases 1–5 and 7–11 are included in *rūpaskandha* (AKBh 1.16).

silver, gold, etc., in a single mountain, there are eighteen different elements in a continuum of an individual (*saṃtāna*): six classes of sense-organs or faculties (*indriya*), six classes of sense-objects (*viṣaya*), and six corresponding elements (*dhātu*). Sense-organs are here “conceived as receptacles of experience (*indriyādhiṣṭhāna*) rather than physical organs interacting with empirical objects,” so they do not function as “the faculties of an internal agent” but as “instruments or mediums joining together the external spheres of sensory activity with the internal spheres of perception” (see *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* ad I, 4).²⁵

eighteen elements (<i>dhātu</i>)		
1. eye (<i>caḡsuradhātu</i>)	7. form (<i>rūpadhātu</i>)	13. visual consciousness (<i>caḡsurvijñānadhātu</i>)
2. ear – auditory system (<i>śrotradhātu</i>)	8. sound (<i>śabdadhātu</i>)	14. auditory consciousness (<i>śrotravijñānadhātu</i>)
3. nose – olfactory system (<i>ghrāṇadhātu</i>)	9. odour (<i>gandhadhātu</i>)	15. olfactory consciousness (<i>ghrāṇavijñānadhātu</i>)
4. tongue – gustatory system (<i>jihvādhātu</i>)	10. taste (<i>rasadhātu</i>)	16. gustatory consciousness (<i>jihvāvijñānadhātu</i>)
5. touch – tactile system (<i>kāyadhātu</i>)	11. tangible object (<i>spraṣṭavyadhātu</i>)	17. tactile consciousness (<i>kāyavijñānadhātu</i>)
6. mind – cognitive system (<i>manodhātu</i>)	12. mental object (<i>dharmadhātu</i>)	18. mental consciousness (<i>manovijñānadhātu</i>)

Mind (*manas*) or consciousness (*vijñāna*) is, according to this classification, divided into seven units, i.e. six different sensory elements (visual consciousness, etc.), and one element of mind (*manodhātu*), which is a part of an individual mental flow of a life continuum (*saṃtāna*).²⁶ Buddhism clearly distinguishes between the mind (*manodhātu*) as cognitive system and the six faculties of manifested consciousness. “Thus cognition, in its perceptual aspect, has a dual form: subjectively, it discloses a bare consciousness that merely attends to the flow of sensations; objectively, it corresponds to

²⁵ Coseru 2017: 18.

²⁶ Stcherbatsky 1923: 10.

each specific domain of empirical awareness: visual objects to visual awareness, sounds to auditory awareness, etc.”²⁷

The second chapter of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* concerns “faculties” (*indriya*), which are directly analysed in the first twenty-one verses (*kārikās*). Vasubandhu starts with the etymological meaning of the word *indriya*, which according to him literally means “belonging to Indra” (root *idi-*, denotes *paramaiśvarya*), supreme power, force or authority etc. So *indriya* means a ruler (*adhipati*).

Vasubandhu writes that one should understand this predominance or sovereignty (*adhipatyam*) “(1) with regard to the perception of their special object and (2) with regard to all objects, six organs” (*AKBh* 2a.b). “That is, by reason of their predominance through their affinity to the six consciousnesses. The five organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch), the first of which is the organ of sight (*caḥsus*), are predominant through their affinity to the five sense consciousnesses (*viññāna*), visual consciousness (*caḥsurviññāna*), etc., each one of which distinguishes its own object (*viśaya*), visible things, etc. The mental organ (*manas*) is predominant with regard to the mental consciousness (*manoviññāna*) which distinguishes all objects. It is in this way that the six sense organs are predominant...” (*AKBh* 2.2a–b).²⁸

“But, we might say, the sense objects, visibles, etc., are also predominant through their affinity to the consciousness, and as a consequence, should they not also be considered as *indriyas*? They are not predominant merely by this. ‘Predominance’ means ‘predominant power.’ The eye is predominant, for (1) it exercises this predominance with regard to the arising of the consciousness (*caḥsurviññāna*) that knows visible things, being the common cause of all consciousnesses of visible things, whereas each visible thing merely aids the arising of but one consciousness” (*AKBh* 2.2a–b).²⁹

2. The role of senses in Mipham Rinpoche’s *The Gate for Entering the Way of a Pandita (GEW)*

The Gate for Entering the Way of a Pandita was written by Mipham, an indigenous Tibetan philosopher, who was a student of Jamgon Kongtrul, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and Paltrul Rinpoche. This work is according Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, a contemporary world-renowned Buddhist teacher and meditation master, a very useful and important key for comprehending the great treatises of Buddhist

²⁷ Coseru 2017: 20.

²⁸ Pruden 1991: 156.

²⁹ Ibid.

philosophy such as Nāgārjuna's, etc.³⁰ Even in the following short summary of this key text for understanding Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, we will see that it is a typical scholastic classification. Because Mipham starts his first volume of these four volumes of scholastic manuals with a characterization of aggregates (*phung po*), the sense elements (*khams*), and faculties (*dbang po*), we can consider these issues as the first steps to a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings.

In the *Prologue* Mipham notes that if one would like to get "the discriminating knowledge (*shes rab; prajñā*) that unmistakably ascertains what should be known",³¹ he should study the ten topics (*don bcu*): (1) the aggregates; (2) the elements; (3) the sense-spheres; (4) dependent origination; (5) the correct and the incorrect; (6) the faculties; (7) time; (8) the truths; (9) the vehicles; and (10) conditioned and unconditioned things. I will concentrate here on the first three topics and the sixth one because they form the main theme of my article.

2.a. The aggregates (*skandha*)

Mipham's classification and characterization of the five aggregates (*phung po; skandha*) closely follows Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*. At first (GEW 1.3) he enumerates all five aggregates and then he refers to the aggregate of physical form (*gzugs; rūpa*) that he subdivides into four causal forms (*rgyu gzugs bzhi*) and eleven forms of effect (*'bras gzugs bcu gcig*).

The four causal forms (*rgyu gzugs*) consists of four great elements (*'byung ba chen po bzhi; caturmahābhautika*):³² (1) the earth element (*sa'i khams; pṛthivīdhātu*), (2) the water element (*chu khams; āpodhātu*), (3) the fire element (*me khams; tejodhātu*), and (4) the wind element (*rlung khams; vāyudhātu*). These elements are characterized as follows: "The earth element is solidity and its function is to support. The water element is fluidity and cohesion. The fire element is heat and ripening. The wind element is motion and expansion" (GEW 1.4).³³ These great four elements (earth, etc.) are also termed as "radical substance" because the sense organs arise from them.

Mipham, still faithfully following Vasubandhu's *AKBh*, notes that the eleven forms of effect (*'bras gzugs bcu gcig*) include the five sense faculties/powers (*dbang po lnga; pañcendriya*) and the five sense objects

³⁰ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 9.

³¹ Ibid.: 14.

³² Vasubandhu writes that these four *dhātus* are called "great" ("primary", *mahā; chen po*) "because they are the point of support for all derived matter" (*AKBh* 1.12a–b).

³³ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 16.

(*Inga don; artha*). He writes that, according to the *Abhidharmakośa*, there is also an eleventh type called “imperceptible form” (*rnam par rig byed min pa'i gzugs; avijñaptirūpa*), which is “the form for mental consciousness” (*chos kyi skye mched pa'i gzugs*), as Asaṅga’s *Abhidharmasamuccaya* says (GEW 1.5).³⁴

The five sense faculties / powers (*dbang po*)—eyes, ear, nose, tongue, and body—are dominant causal-factors or dominant cognitions (*bdag rkyen; adhipatipratyaya*)³⁵ for their own respective cognitions (*rang rang gi shes pa*). They are subtle internal forms (*nang gi gzugs; ādhyātmikarūpa*)³⁶ “[based on the physical sense organ]” (GEW 1.7).³⁷ Mipham very poetically and interestingly describes the shapes of these five faculties as follows: “The eye faculty is similar to [the round and blue shape of] the *umaka* [sesame/cumin] flower; the ear faculty is similar to a twisted roll of birch bark; the nose faculty is similar to parallel copper needles; the tongue faculty is similar to a crescent moon disc; and the body faculty is [all-covering] similar to the skin of the smooth-to-the-touch bird” (GEW 1.8).³⁸

The five sense objects (*don*; GEW 1.9) are visible forms (*gzugs*), sounds (*sgra*), odours (*dri*), tastes (*ro*), and tangible objects (*reg bya*). Visible forms, which are objects of eye (*mig gi yul*), are then divided into (1) colours (*kha dog*) and (2) shapes (*dbyibs*). Colours are divided into four *primary* colours (blue, yellow, white, and red) and eight *secondary* colours (cloudy and smoky, dusty and misty, sunny and shady, light and dark). But there are many different secondary colours that exist due to the interfusion of the primary ones. The shapes are “long or short, square or round, concave or convex, fine or gross, even or uneven”, and can be further subdivided into “triangular, crescent-shaped, oblong, and so forth”³⁹ (GEW 1.10–12).

The second kind of sense objects discussed is sounds (*sgra*), which are objects of the ear (*rna gi yul*). There are sounds that “originate from conscious elemental causes such as the voice of a sentient being or a finger snap; sounds that originate from unconscious elemental causes such as the sounds of a river, the wind, and so forth; sounds that originate from both [conscious and unconscious elements] such as a drum beat; animate sounds that express meaning; and inanimate sounds that don’t express meaning. Sounds that express meaning can

³⁴ See above. Cf. *AKBh* 1.9a–b, 1.11.

³⁵ This dominant cognition empowers/controls the arising of the *karmic* fruition, as for the eye sense and so forth. See *THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool*.

³⁶ These forms are defined as included within the mental continuum of beings (*saṃtāna*). See *THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool*.

³⁷ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 18.

be either spoken by a mundane person or by a noble person. Sounds can also be divided into pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral" (GEW 1.13).

The third kind of sense objects is odours (*dri*), which are the objects of the nose. Odours can be "fragrant, foul, or neutral, and those that are natural or manufactured" (GEW 1.14).⁴⁰

The fourth kind of sense objects is tastes (*ro*), which are the objects of the tongue. They can be "sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent", but there are also many other subtypes that arise from the mixing of these six tastes. The tastes as well as the sounds can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (GEW 1.15).⁴¹

The fifth kind of sense objects is tangible objects (*reg bya*), which are objects of the body. There are many such objects, including smoothness, roughness, heaviness, lightness, etc. We can include here also inner physical sensations of "hunger, thirst and cold", as well as feelings of being "sated, ill, aged, dying", etc. (GEW 1.16).⁴²

There are five types of forms producing mental objects (*chos kyi skye mched pa'i gzugs lnga*): (1) Deduced forms that are compounded from minute particles or atoms (*rdul phra rab; paramāṇu*). Even if they are physical, they can be known only mentally. (2) Spatial or clear forms like physical space, etc. (3) Imperceptible forms (*rnam par rig byed ma yin pa'i gzugs; avijñaptirūpa*)⁴³ resulting from a formally undertaken vow such as the ordination of a Buddhist monk. (4) Imagined forms (*kun btags pa'i gzugs*) such as mental images or dream forms. (5) Mastered forms (*dbang 'byor ba'i gzugs*), which are forms of one "who has attained mastery" and result from the force of mind that mastered its concentration (*bsam gtan; dhyāna*), for instance the totality of blue etc. (GEW 1.17).

The five sense faculties and five sense objects are composed of atoms (*rdul phra rab*); these are ultimately the smallest forms and are subtle and partless (GEW 1.21–22).⁴⁴

The second aggregate is feeling or sensation (*tshor ba; vedanā*), defined as impression (GEW 1.24), and is characterised as pleasant, painful, and neutral, or as pleasure and mental pleasure, pain and mental pain, and neutral sensation (GEW 1.25). In relation to the six senses (*dbang po*) and their contact with objects, there are six types of sensation (*tshor ba drug*). They result from the contact of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind with their objects. When these six types of sensation are characterised in terms of pleasure, pain, and neutrality

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 19.

⁴³ See above. Cf. Also *AKBh* 1.11.

⁴⁴ Seven atoms make one particle or "molecule".

they form altogether eighteen sorts of sensation that accompany every cognitive act of the sense organ (*GEW* 1.26).⁴⁵

The third aggregate I would like to mention is perception (*'du shes; samjñā*). It “consist[s] of the grasping of distinguishing features” of objects (*GEW* 1.28).⁴⁶ Perceptions are also divided according to sensations into six types that arise from the contact of the sense (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) with their object (*yul; GEW* 1.29).⁴⁷

2.b. The elements (*dhātu*)

The second chapter of *GEW* concerns the role of the elements (*kham; dhātu*). Mipham enumerates ten elements of the aggregate of forms. They are the five elements of the sense faculties and the five elements of the sense objects (see above). Then there are the seven elements of the aggregate of consciousness, i.e. six elements of consciousness (consciousness of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind), plus the mind element (*manodhātu; GEW* 2.1–2). The mind element is “the faculty which produces a mental cognition” (*GEW* 2.3).⁴⁸

It is important to know that the elements can be demonstrated only in their respective field (for instance, in the visual field only the element of visual form can be demonstrated); “the remaining ones cannot be demonstrated” (*GEW* 2.16).⁴⁹ The sense faculties are considered the objective support (*dmigs pa; ālambana*) for the arising of their respective consciousnesses. For instance, when the eye is open and sees the shapes of a table then it is a “faculty with the support” (*GEW* 2.33).⁵⁰

2.c. The sense-spheres (*āyatana*)

The third chapter of *GEW* concerns the twelve sense-spheres or sources (*skye mched; āyatana*). Mipham notes that the eye element (*mig gi kham; cakṣurdhātu*) and eye source (*mig gi skye mched; cakṣurāyatana*) are synonyms or have one meaning (*don gcig*). The only difference between them is that they are “different systems in different contexts”.⁵¹ It is the same with the other elements (ear, nose, tongue, and body) and their objects or sources (*skye mched*) that are together included in a physical form (*gzugs kham; rūpadhātu*). Similarly, the

⁴⁵ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 21. See *Samyuttanikāya*, 22.55 and *Dīghanikāya*, 22.

⁴⁶ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 36.

⁴⁹ Eye can see only visible, ear can hear only audible etc. (see above).

⁵⁰ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 41.

⁵¹ Ibid.: 43.

element of mental objects (*chos khams*) is the source of mental objects (*chos kyi skye mched; dharmāyatana*). The seven consciousness elements (*rnam par shes pa'i khams bdun*) are gathered in the sense-field sphere (*gid kyi skye mched*). Altogether they form twelve sense-spheres or sources (*skye mched; āyatana*), “from the eye source and [visible] form source to the mind source and mental object source” (GEW 3.1).⁵²

Mipham moreover divides the sense-spheres as Vasubandhu does into six *internal* (*nang*) sources (from eye to mind) and six *outer* (*phyi*) sources (from visible form to mental object). They are literally called “apprehended” and “apprehender” (*gzung 'dzin; grāhya* and *grāhaka*) or apprehended object and apprehending subject. They are “sources (*skye mched*) because they are the medium for a cognition (*rnam shes; vijñāna*) to occur and unfold by means of apprehender and apprehended” (GEW 3.2).⁵³

As described above, the mind (*blo*) plays the most important role in our perceiving and cognition because it “cognizes the object of the eye and as well as of the other faculties, which are visible form and the other [sense-objects]. Because it perceives in the manner of engagement [in] and disengagement [from sense-objects] together with the cognitions of [each of] the five sense faculties, it is the perceiver-subject of all knowable things” (GEW 3.6).⁵⁴ Mind is able to cognize without conceptualization not only the objects of “the five sense consciousnesses” (*rnam shes*), but also itself. Through conceptualization the mind can name all outer and inner objects of its knowledge. Mipham writes that this knowledge is “undeluded” (GEW 3.7) and that “the cognitions of the five sense doors are always nonconceptual, while mental cognition has the two modes of being conceptual and nonconceptual” (GEW 3.11).⁵⁵

2.d. *The role of the senses in dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda)*

The fourth chapter of *GEW* concerns the principle of causality or dependent origination (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*), a key element of Buddhist doctrine. It is “an elaboration of the truth of the origin of suffering, but this difficult teaching is intertwined with other important themes of Buddhist thought”.⁵⁶ Tsongkhapa wrote about this hallmark concept of Buddhism in his *In Praise of Dependent Origination* (*brTen 'brel bstod pa*). Dependent origination “is concerned

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 44.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gethin 1998: 74.

primarily with the workings of the mind: the way in which things we think, say, and do have an effect on both ourselves and others."⁵⁷ It roughly means that all phenomena, physical or mental, rise and fall dependent on their causes and conditions. It is depicted as the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination and is intended to explain the origin of suffering (*duḥkha*; *sdug bsngal*) as well as its termination.⁵⁸

In his depiction of dependent origination Mipham is—as usual—very accurate and systematic. “Dependent origination is as follows: Because this exists, such and-such will arise. Because that has arisen, such-and-such arises. Hence, because of ignorance (*ma rig pa*) the formations (*’du byed*) arise, because of the formations the consciousnesses (*rnam shes*) will arise, and so forth. The same holds true for name-and-form (*ming dang gzugs*), the six sense-sources (*skye mched drug*), contact (*reg pa*), sensation (*tshor pa*), craving (*sred pa*), grasping (*len pa*), becoming (*srid pa*), and birth (*skye ba*), down to old age and death (*rga shi*). Sorrow, lamentation, misery, unhappiness and distress will then arise. Thus, this great mass of total suffering arises. Similarly, the formations will cease because of ignorance having ceased and so forth, down to the point where, because of birth, old age and death having ceased, sorrow and so forth, this great mass of total suffering will also cease” (GEW 4.6–7).⁵⁹

The inner six sources (eye and so forth) are the fifth link in the chain (*gzhi/gleng gzhi*; *nidāna*) of dependent origination. They arise depending on (conditioned by) the fourth link, mind-and-body (*ming gzugs*; *nāmarūpa*; “name-and-form”; GEW 4.12). When the sense objects, sense faculties, and replete consciousnesses meet together then six types of contact arise “such as perception through the contact of the form of an object meeting with the eye” (GEW 4.13).⁶⁰ Conditioned by sense contact is link (7), feeling/sensation (*tshor pa*; *vedanā*), and conditioned by feeling is link (8), craving (*sred pa*; *tṛṣṇā*) towards the six sense objects (visible forms and so forth). This craving is a strong desire that is not “separated from a pleasant sensation, the fearful craving of desiring to cast away an unpleasant sensation, and a self-sufficient abiding in regards to indifferent sensations”; this link is “to experience the taste of the objects caused by sensation, and to draw in these objects because of taking delight in clinging to them” (GEW 4.15).⁶¹ Conditioned by link (8), craving (*sred pa*), is link (9), grasping

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 153.

⁵⁸ See Siderits 2007: 41–45.

⁵⁹ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid.: 53.

⁶¹ Ibid.: 53–54.

(*len pa*), when one strongly wishes not “to be separated from what is beautiful and pleasant!” (GEW 4.16).⁶²

2.e. The faculties (*indriya*)

The sixth chapter of *GEW* concerns twenty-two faculties (*dbang po*) that apprehend individual objects (GEW 6.1–2).⁶³ The faculties of eye and ear apprehend their objects “from a distance without meeting the object” and “without any regularity as to whether the object is bigger or smaller than itself” (GEW 6.12).⁶⁴ The faculties of nose, tongue, and body are different because they apprehend their objects after meeting with them and “take hold of the object in a size equal to itself” (GEW 6.13).⁶⁵

3. Tsongkhapa's commentary to “An Analysis of the sense-spheres” (*āyatanaparīkṣā*) of Nāgārjuna's *MMK*

In the third chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*), Nāgārjuna analyses the doctrine of the twelve *āyatanas*, i.e. the six sense faculties (*indriya*) and their six respective sense fields/objects (*viṣaya*). Candrakīrti, in his commentary to *MMK*, *Prasannapadā*, calls this chapter “an analysis of the faculty of eye” (*caḥsurindriyaparīkṣā*) because Nāgārjuna examines here explicitly only the faculty of vision. Nāgārjuna argues that this faculty is empty (*śūnya*; *stong pa*) of inherent nature (*svabhāva*; *rang bzhin*) and therefore does not exist ultimately or is not established from its own side (*rang gi ngo bo grub pa*), as Tibetans say. In *MMK* 3.8 Nāgārjuna notes that the same argumentation is valid also for the other five sense faculties and their fields.⁶⁶ According to Kalupahana, Nāgārjuna concentrates his analyses on visual perception because among faculties and their functions this epistemological issue was the most important and complicated problem.⁶⁷

Tsongkhapa's commentary on *MMK* (*rTsa she*), known as *Ocean of Reasoning* (*rTsa she ṭik chen rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*), or *dBu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba'i rnam bshad rigs pa'i rgya mtsho* (*Ocean of Reasoning: Commentary on Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Text Known as*

⁶² Ibid.: 54.

⁶³ They are: the life faculty; the male and female faculties; the five faculties of the sensations of pleasure, pain, mental pleasure, mental pain, and neutral sensation; the five faculties of faith, diligence, recollection, concentration, and discrimination control etc. (GEW 6.3–8).

⁶⁴ Mipham Rinpoche 1997: 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Siderits and Katsura 2013: 48–49.

⁶⁷ Kalupahana 1986: 132–133.

“Wisdom”) as it was called by Tsongkhapa, is a very important text for understanding the Tibetan approach towards—and interpretation of—Madhyamaka philosophy “founded” by Nāgārjuna. Tsongkhapa’s commentary is a very systematic, complex, and subtle analysis of *MMK* founded on highly developed Buddhist logic and epistemology.⁶⁸

As in the case of other Tibetan Buddhist philosophical texts, *Ocean of Reasoning* is divided into sections, subsections, sub-subsections, etc.,⁶⁹ and this is also true of the third chapter, “An examination of sense faculties (*dbang po brtag pa*)”. This chapter explains how phenomena such as sense faculties (third chapter of *MMK*), aggregates (fourth chapter of *MMK*), and elements (fifth chapter of *MMK*) are without a permanent phenomenal self (*bdag*; *ātman*). Tsongkhapa’s analysis starts with a refutation of the view that sense faculties (*dbang po*) have self.

In the explanation of the third chapter (section 1), Tsongkhapa introduces the opponent’s thesis of some abhidharma schools (especially Sarvāstivāda) that was postulated by Nāgārjuna in *MMK* 3.1: “Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind are the six faculties. Their spheres are the visible objects, etc.”⁷⁰ According to Tsongkhapa this verse means that “if nothing exists essentially, such things as seeing would not be possible, and therefore that such things as seeing *do* exist essentially” (*rang bzhin kyis yod pa*) or as ultimately real, i.e. have inherent nature (*rang bzhin*; *svabhāva*).⁷¹

Tsongkhapa refutes this argument as invalid (section 1.2). He argues that “the eye as the agent of seeing” as well as “the object and action of seeing” cannot essentially exist.⁷² To support this refutation he quotes a seemingly puzzling argument of Nāgārjuna’s from *MMK* 3.2: “That very seeing does not see itself at all. How can something that cannot see itself see another?”⁷³ Tsongkhapa explains this cryptic verse as follows. We cannot accept that the visual object and visual subject have an inherent nature because they can exist only interdependently. So, when we do not have any visual object we cannot have its receptive subject, and vice versa. If the visual object and visual subject existed inherently, they would not need causes and conditions for their existence. It means that the object of negation (*dgag bya*) is “the *inherent* existence of the seer, etc., but not their *mere* existence”.⁷⁴ Nāgārjuna of

⁶⁸ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: xii–xiii.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: xviii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 128.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 129. Cf. also Siderits and Katsura 2013: 44.

⁷² Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 129.

⁷³ *Ibid.*: 129–130. Cf. also Siderits and Katsura 2013: 44.

⁷⁴ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 130.

course does not want to say that sense faculties and their respective spheres do not exist at all! He just shows that they depend on each other and therefore exist only in a conventional way.⁷⁵

Tsongkhapa's other comment is as follows: "How can something that cannot see itself see others such as blueness? So, there is no inherently existent seeing and the same applies to the ear, etc."⁷⁶ This argument is an allusion to the empirical *principle of irreflexivity* that Nāgārjuna uses in *MMK* 3.2. It is a very well-known argument that the knife cannot cut itself, the finger cannot point at itself, and so forth.⁷⁷ So, even the eye cannot see itself and this also holds for the other senses, i.e. the ear cannot hear itself, and so on. Tsongkhapa then comes to the conclusion, quoting Nāgārjuna's *MMK* 3.4: "When there is not the slightest seeing, there is no seer. How could it make sense to say that in virtue of seeing, it sees?"⁷⁸ And, when there is no seer, "how can there be seeing or the seen?" Nāgārjuna asks in *MMK* 6cd.

According to Tsongkhapa's commentary, this means that when no seer essentially exists then even the seen and seeing cannot essentially exist because they are without their cause, i.e. the seer.⁷⁹ And it follows that the seer, the seen, and seeing can exist only in interdependence and relative to each other, i.e. without having independent intrinsic nature (*rang bzhin; svabhāva*).⁸⁰ As it is accurately summarised by Garfield: "Vision and its subjects are thus relational, dependent phenomena and not substantial or independent entities. So neither seeing nor seer nor the seen (conceived of as the object of sense perception) can be posited as entities with inherent existence. The point is just that sense perception cannot be understood as an autonomous phenomenon, but only as a dependent process."⁸¹

From this follows that even "the four" (consciousness, contact, feeling and craving) cannot ultimately or essentially exist because consciousness (*rnam shes*) arises in dependence on the seeing and the seen. And in dependence on consciousness arises contact (*reg pa*), in dependence on contact arises feeling (*tshor pa*), and in dependence on feeling arises craving (*sred pa*).⁸² If all this does not exist essentially but only in dependence or conditionally on each other "how could such

⁷⁵ Garfield 1995: 137.

⁷⁶ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 130.

⁷⁷ The *principle of irreflexivity*—"that an entity cannot operate on itself"—is generally used "when the opponent seeks to head off an infinite regress by claiming that an entity *x* bears relation *R* to itself." Siderits and Katsura 2013: 8–9.

⁷⁸ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 131.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*: 135.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Garfield 1995: 140.

⁸² Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield, 2006: 134.

things as the appropriator exist?"⁸³ Then "such things" as becoming (*srid pa*), rebirth (*skye ba*), aging, and death (*rga shi*) also cannot exist essentially/inherently, i.e. they cannot have an intrinsic nature (*rang bzhin; svabhāva*).

But the opponent objects that the intrinsic nature of seeing was refuted, but those of other sense faculties such as hearing, and so on, were not addressed and therefore they have intrinsic nature. Nāgārjuna responds to this objection (*MMK* 3.8): "Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind are the six faculties. Their spheres are the visible objects, etc." Tsongkhapa comments that the refutation of seeing concerns also the other five senses and their objects, i.e. hearing, the hearer, and sound, and so on. Even "hearing does not hear itself at all", as well as smelling, tasting, and so forth.⁸⁴ All these are empty (*stong pa; śūnya*) and do not exist inherently. They exist only conventionally and dependent on their causes and conditions. This conclusion concerns all of perception and can be applied to all of phenomenality. Tsongkhapa supports his arguments with citations from Buddhist texts that have, according to his thinking,⁸⁵ definitive/ultimate meaning (*nges don; nītārtha*). They are the *sūtras* that teach the emptiness of all phenomenon, as is written, for instance, in the *Lalitavistarasūtra* (*mDo sde, Kha* 89b):

Depending on eye and material form the visual consciousness arises here. However, material form does not depend upon the eye. Material form does not enter the eye. These phenomena are selfless and without beauty, nonetheless people imagine them to have both self and beauty. They erroneously imagine them to have that which they lack. From this arises the visual consciousness. Through the cessation and arising of consciousness, respectively, the elimination of consciousness and its development are observed. Yogis see nothing as coming and going; rather as empty and illusion-like.⁸⁶

In the summary of the third chapter Tsongkhapa writes that "the eye, seeing, etc., are completely tenable only as illusion-like objects..."⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid.: 135. See *MMK* 3.7.

⁸⁴ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 136–137.

⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the status of which Buddhist texts constitute ultimate meaning (*nges don*) or provisional meaning (*drang don; neyārtha*) has been fiercely contested by Tibetan philosophers from other schools (I owe this thought to an anonymous reviewer).

⁸⁶ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 138. Dhondup 2006: 176.

⁸⁷ According to Tsongkhapa's school, Gelug, all things are *like* illusions and hallucinatory objects because they are empty and as "mental constructs, not existing from their own side". Williams 2009: 70, 296. As Nāgārjuna says in *Śūnyatāsaptati*: "Consciousness arises in dependence on internal and external (*nang dang phyi; ādhyātmikabāhya*) entrances (*skye ched; nyatana*). Because consciousness

when they are not found through the analysis, their *essential* existence is refuted, but such things as the eye are not refuted at all".⁸⁸ Because the seer and seeing depend on each other they do not exist inherently. Nevertheless, they exist conventionally and are functionally efficient because they arise and fall conditionally based on the effect of the *karman* principle. Due to this analysis (*dpyod pa*) one develops an outstanding knowledge (*shes rab; prajñā*) of the ultimate way things really are (*chos nyid; dharmatā*). Tsongkhapa ends his analysis of the six kinds of objects comparing all their experience to a magically created person (*sgyu ma'i skyes bu*) "experiencing an illusory object".⁸⁹

This example of Tsongkhapa's seems to be an allusion to Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartinī* 23, where Nāgārjuna speaks about illusionistic performance as an example of the functionality of the things that are empty (*śūnya*). He shows here that empty things can be functionally efficient, just as an illusory man (*māyāpuruṣa*) that tries to hinder another illusory man from doing something by "his illusionistic power" can be functionally efficient.⁹⁰ As Westerhoff points out, if we introduce these men in some movie where one of them prevents the other one from opening the door, then we can infer that although they are empty they can be functionally efficient, as in the cinema. Therefore, empty sense-spheres that depend on each other can be functionally efficient due to the *karman* principle.⁹¹

4. Direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) in Buddhist epistemology

Above, I used three examples to show the role of sense organs in the history of Buddhist philosophy. I would like to thematise the role of direct perception using the Buddhist logic-epistemology tradition called *pramāṇavāda*, founded by the Buddhist philosophers Dignāga (c. 480–c. 540) and Dharmakīrti (c. 600–670), in which direct perception (*pratyakṣa*; literary "what is before eyes"; *mngon sum*) is, along with inference (*anumāna; rjes dpag*), the basic form of indubitable valid knowledge (*pramāṇa; tshad ma*). "Perception is always purely non-conceptual and non-linguistic, whereas inference is conceptual, linguistic thinking that proceeds on the basis of good reasons."⁹² Inference or conceptual thought only has access to universals and is

arises in dependence on the entrances, so it is like a mirage (*smig rgyu*) and a (magical) illusion (*sgyu ma*) which are devoid (*stong*) of inherent existence." Komito 1987: 168.

⁸⁸ Geshe Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006: 140. Dhondup 2006: 180.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Westerhoff 2010: 49–50.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tillemans 2016.

therefore “distorted (*bhrānta*) because it ‘superimposes’ universals that aren’t actually there in the particulars themselves”; perception has direct access to specific and real shapes, colours, and so on.⁹³ But due to the stipulation of the mind (*manas*) any instance of direct perception “may be an awareness of a mental object, rather than a visible form, sound, smell, taste, or tactile object.”⁹⁴ Even sense faculties (*indriya*) still play the key role in our perception (*pratyakṣa*) because it arises due to their contact (*sparsa*) with external objects (*viśaya*, *artha* etc.).

According to Buddhist epistemologists there are four types of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*): (1) sense perception (*indriyapratyakṣa*; *dbang po mngon sum*); (2) mental perception (*manobhavapratyakṣa*; *yid kyis myong ba’i mngon sum*); (3) the self-cognition of all mind and mental activities (*svasaṃvedanapratyakṣa*; *rang rig mngon sum*; lit. “self-awareness”); and (4) the yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*; *rnal ’byor mngon sum*).⁹⁵

In a short verse tract called the *Sword of Wisdom* (*Shes rab ral gri*; SW)⁹⁶ that was written in 1885, Lama Mipham remarks that only due to these four direct perceptions can we have evidence such as the appearance of smoke and, because of inference (*’rjes dpag*; *anumāna*), know that a fire is present. Without direct perception it would not be possible to see the arising and ceasing of phenomena as sprouts and so on (SW 19).⁹⁷ He characterises these four types of perception as follows:

(1) “The sense consciousnesses, which arise from the five sense faculties, clearly experience their own objects. Without direct sense perceptions (*dbang po mngon sum*), one would not perceive objects, like someone who is blind” (SW 21).⁹⁸

(2) “Having arisen on the mental sense faculty, mental direct perception (*yid kyis myong ba’i mngon sum*) clearly discerns outer and inner objects. Without mental direct perception, there would be no consciousness of all phenomena that are commonly known” (SW 22).⁹⁹

(3) “A mind that is cognizant and aware naturally knows its objects, but at the same time is also aware of itself, without relying upon something else, and this is what is termed ‘self-awareness’ (*rang rig*)” (SW 25).¹⁰⁰

(4) “Yogic direct perception (*rnal ’byor mngon sum*) is the culmination of meditation practised properly and according to the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dunne 2004: 23.

⁹⁵ Yao 2004: 57–79.

⁹⁶ The full title is *Don rnam par nges pa shes rab ral gri* (*The Sword of Wisdom: An Ascertainment of Meaning*).

⁹⁷ Khenchen Palden Sherab 2018: 3.

⁹⁸ Ibid.: 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

instructions. It clearly experiences its own objects, and without it there would be no vision of objects beyond the ordinary" (SW 23).¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The goal of my article was to demonstrate the standard categorization as well as the complexity and philosophical intricacy of the role of sense organs (*indriya; dbang po*), and their objects, sense elements, and causal relations in our perceiving of the world. It should be remembered that the Buddhist idea of mind (*manas, citta; blo*) as a sixth inner sense has "the same epistemic structure as outer senses and presumably subserved by analogical physical structures"¹⁰²—this constitutes one important difference between Buddhism and the Western approach to senses. As far as mind is concerned, "perhaps no other classical philosophical tradition, East or West, offers a more complex and counter-intuitive account of mind and mental phenomena than Buddhism."¹⁰³

In relation to the perception of the world and its phenomena, Buddhist philosophers worked out very detailed and elaborate schemes of six senses and their objects. Our senses, such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, etc., are the grounds not only for our perceptual knowledge, but also for our beliefs, justification, and understanding of the world. When we take seeing as "an epistemic principle", for example, then "seeing the green field, for instance, normally yields knowledge about the field as well as justified belief about it".¹⁰⁴ The senses and perceptual experience thus form and establish our *openness to the world* and are one of the main sources of our knowledge and justifications.

Sense organs played the most important role in our cognition of objects from the beginnings of Buddhist thought. Consciousness (*viññāna*) as such was only "a secondary product of the sense organ and object" because, according to Sarvāstivādins, "eyes, rather than eye-consciousness, see."¹⁰⁵ They thought that the senses, their objects, and so forth were endowed with an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), the defining characteristic of all phenomena. *Svabhāva* must be eternal because "whatever is the defining characteristic of form (*rūpa*) exists

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Garfield 1995: 137.

¹⁰³ Coseru 2017: 1.

¹⁰⁴ Audi 1988: 26.

¹⁰⁵ Yao 2005: 8.

throughout time".¹⁰⁶ Therefore we could not imagine the non-existent intentional object of some act of consciousness and the causal consequence of something that has ceased to exist.¹⁰⁷ This opinion of the Sarvāstivādins was founded on the concept of *intentionality of consciousness*, the idea that any consciousness must be aware of something. An intentional object of consciousness must exist, otherwise the ethical *karman* principle of retribution would not work and we could not remember or recognize something that was or is not yet.¹⁰⁸ Williams writes that this concept of intentionality was known in "the very earliest strata of Buddhist epistemology in the theory of the twelve *āyatana*s—sense bases and their objects in the form of sense-data corresponding in type to each of the six bases—and the doctrine of the *dhātus*, the preceding twelve *āyatana*s plus six sorts of resulting consciousness (*vijñāna*)."¹⁰⁹

But, as we saw above, the concept of the independent and fundamentally existent *svabhāvas* was very sharply criticized by Nāgārjuna. The twelve *āyatana*s, i.e. six sense faculties (*indriya*) and their six respective sense field objects (*viśaya*), are, according to him, empty (*śūnya*) of *svabhāva* and cannot be ultimately real since they originate from causes and conditions.¹¹⁰ Later Tsongkhapa wrote in his commentary to *MMK* that the twelve *āyatana*s were illusion-like objects. Their *essential* existence is refuted but they still exist in a conventional manner and therefore are functionally efficient due to the *karman* principle.

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¹⁰⁶ Yaśomitra's commentary on *AKBh* 5.27: *yad rūpadeḥ svalakṣaṇam tat sarvasviṃ kāle vidyata iti*.

¹⁰⁷ Williams 1981: 42.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: 230. See *AKBh* 2.54c–d, 5.25.

¹⁰⁹ Williams 1981: 230.

¹¹⁰ According to Nāgārjuna, causes, effects and conditions "are both notionally and existentially dependent on one another. They therefore cannot exist from their own side, irrespective of the existence of one another. Moreover, they also depend for their existence on us, because it is our cognitive act of cutting up the world of phenomena in the first place that creates the particular assembly of objects that constitutes a causal field, which then in turn gives rise to the notions of cause and effect." Westerhoff, 2009: 98.

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A Bon tantric approach to the senses: the evidence from Khu tsha zla 'od's *Black Pillar* (*Ka ba nag po man ngag rtsa ba'i rgyud*)¹

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The great early g.Yung drung Bon Treasure revealer and polymath, Khu tsha zla 'od, was renowned for the sophistication and subtlety of his vision, and also for his wide-ranging and often innovative syncretic genius. For example, he was such a famous contributor to early Tibetan medicine and astrology that some Tibetan scholars believed he was one and the same person as g.Yu thog pa Yon tan mgon po (1127–1203). He was also one of the very first Tibetans to take up the Dharmakīrtian style of logic, which he introduced creatively into his rDzogs chen commentary *mKhas pa mi bzhi'i 'grel pa*, entangled there with indigenous² concepts such as *bla* (Kapstein 2009). Similarly, he

¹ I would like to thank the Käte Hamburger Kolleg at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum for their very generous sponsorship of my attendance at the 2016 IATS conference in Bergen, Norway, where this paper was originally given.

² The term 'indigenous' is not a simple one. My usage in this particular paper is to indicate distinctive ancestral cultural categories that were present, or were perceived to have been present, before the ascendancy of the largely Indian-derived Buddhism that eventually came to constitute the dominant religious culture. No categorizations of indigenous cultures are absolute, and there is little doubt that numerous 'indigenous' cultural categories in this sense might carry influences from or have originated beyond the boundaries of ethnic Tibet. The key point is that they were either established within local cultures before the ascendancy of Buddhism, or at least were widely perceived as being such, and that they were in that sense distinguishable from Buddhism. One should take note that in the influential *Gling grags*, which is believed to be approximately contemporaneous with Khu tsha, an emphatically Tibeto-centric view is taken of the origins of Bon, and no mention is made of any foreign origins outside of Tibet, for example, in Zhang zhung. Bon is also described in the *Gling grags* as having been present in Tibet for an extremely long time, before even the first Tibetan kings. For all the above reasons, one might, albeit heuristically, use the term 'indigenous', as I have done here. I am not yet certain of Khu tsha's precise views on the origins of Bon, so if it transpires that his views differ significantly from the *Gling grags*, I might have to adjust some of the vocabulary used in this paper accordingly. The forthcoming publication of Per Kvaerne's detailed study of the *Gling grags* will surely prove an important milestone in Tibetan studies.

revealed the root tantras of the Bon *Phur pa* tradition, most notably, the magnificent *Ka ba nag po*,³ which succeeded in integrating numerous indigenous Tibetan elements into an Indian Mahāyoga-style literary and doctrinal template. But was his approach to the senses in his *Ka ba nag po* reproducing Tantric Buddhism, or was he (true to form), reproducing indigenous elements as well? In this paper, I argue that he did both: at a structural doctrinal level, his *Ka ba nag po* reproduced Tantric Buddhist understandings of the senses, while at the more surface level of sensory aesthetics and cultural imagery, his *Ka ba nag po* reproduced numerous indigenous forms as well.

Khu tsha operated in IHo brag probably in the late 12th and early 13th century,⁴ a period when some of the foundational formulations of g.Yung drung Bon lamaism were still being articulated. My working hypotheses regarding Khu tsha's historical predicament as a Bon intellectual are therefore as follows:

Perfecting and refining the ongoing construction of the emergent lamaistic-style g.Yung drung Bon might have appeared the most urgent requirement of the moment, if Bon was to thrive at all in the new Buddhist-determined religious economy based around lamas and gompas. This new religious economy was still in the process to varying degrees of actively displacing the previously prevalent regionally varied religious systems that were often non-literary, and

³ In this article, for reasons of brevity, I will be relying mainly upon the following witness: *Ka ba nag po man ngag rtsa ba'i rgyud*, Vol. 160, pp. 1–125 of *Theg chen g.yung drung bon gyi bka' 'gyur*, Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, Lhasa 1999. (= 3rd edition of Bon Kanjur, in 178 volumes). However, at points where this edition does not make so much sense, I have also shown variant readings from the brTen 'gyur edition of the *Ka ba nag po*: Volume 268, pp. 1–163, *Bon gyi brten 'gyur chen mo*, 2nd Edition (in 333 volumes), n.d., n.p., ISBN 7-223-00984-5 (sic). From a private collection, courtesy of Dr J-L Achard.

⁴ There is some confusion regarding his dates. According to Kongtrul's *gTer ston brgya rtsa'i rnam thar* (as presented in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, Shechen Edition, Vol. 1, ff. 418–420), he apparently lived during the mid twelfth to early 13th century; although Bon sources often put his birth date earlier, in 1024. Kapstein (2009) argues that Khu tsha already knows the work rNgog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109), whose logical thinking is evident in his *mKhas pa Mi bzhi'i 'grel pa*; and that this might support the later dates. Conversely, the late Helmut Krasser told me (personal communication, September 16th, 2013) that he thought Khu tsha could have accessed Dharmakīrtian thinking even before rNgog Blo ldan shes rab, so that the earlier Bon dating could not be ruled out. In this paper, I am provisionally going with Kongtrul's statement that Khu tsha's treasure revelation was roughly contemporaneous with Guru Chos dbang's early life (1212–1270), and with g.Yu thog pa (1126–1202) ('*di nyid chos dbang rin po che'i sku tsh'e'i stod g.yu thog pa dang dus mnyam du byon par gsal bas*), an assertion possibly supported by the references to Khu tsha in Chos dbang's biography (Guru Chos dbang n.d., page 136).

had been served by a variety of non-lamaistic religious specialists, and which had in many cases also attracted the ire of Buddhism through their historic acceptances of such practices as tumulus burial and animal sacrifice. And since the new lamaistic-style religious economy differed greatly from what went before by being so predominantly textual, it remained particularly incumbent on the Bon-inclined intelligentsia of Khu tsha's generation to continue to produce viable lamaistic texts. As we know, such textual production was often framed within the g.Yung drung Bon narrative of *gter ma* discovery of ancient texts, that had been buried (for the second time in their very long lives) during the reign of Khri Srong lde'u btsan; but such framing narratives need not distract us too much from a consideration of the pressing historical circumstances that demanded such textual production at that particular time.

From studying the available extant witnesses (and assuming that they predominantly represent Khu tsha's original intentions rather than redaction by later hands),⁵ it seems to me that in producing his *Ka ba nag po*, Khu tsha was guided by two contrasting principles, which he expressed through the lens of a distinctive religious orientation. His first principle was resolutely to assert a separate Bon identity, to guard against Bon's disappearance through assimilation into Buddhism. His second principle was to render his texts profoundly congruent with Buddhist doctrine, not only to guard against the kind of Buddhist persecution which forcefully suppressed the important sacrificial elements of the old Tibetan funerary cults,

⁵ In our studies of canonical rNying ma tantras (Mayer 1996, Cantwell and Mayer 2007, 2012), we have usually understood detailed critical editing as a necessary prerequisite to further literary analysis. In the case of the *Ka ba nag po*, for various reasons, we were unable to do this, and were restricted to making a diplomatic transcription based on the four witnesses available to us. But while our presentation of the text is strictly a diplomatic one, at those junctures where our base text is unsatisfactory, or clearly mistaken, we have been compelled in our translation or glosses also to adopt readings from other sources, including from other editions, from commentarial texts, and from the oral advice of Bon lamas. Hence, although our text edition is strictly diplomatic, as we make clear in our annotations, on some occasions, the accompanying (and sometimes provisional) translation is necessarily based on an eclectic range of sources. Because we could not make a critical edition, we therefore harbour many uncertainties about the provenance of the received texts: to what extent do they actually represent Khu tsha's work, to what extent might they represent the work of others? Finding ourselves (as comparative newcomers to the study of Bon) ill equipped to approach such questions, we relied instead on the advice of academic colleagues more deeply versed in Bon literature. At the time of writing, the consensus among the best known contemporary academic Bon scholars was that they saw no reason to doubt that the *Ka ba nag po*, as received, is substantially the work of Khu tsha himself. I should add, the four different witnesses so far examined do not suggest major redactorial interventions.

but also out of a genuine respect and love for what Bon pos could consider to be the genuine and original Buddhist doctrine, which in their view had first been taught by gShen rab. For all the evidence suggests that like his near contemporary and neighbour the rNying ma master Guru Chos dbang, Khu tsha too had a somewhat polytropic religious orientation, producing Treasures texts for Buddhism as well as for Bon. Just as Chos dbang was a great Buddhist polymath and Treasure Revealer who also participated in Bon (Guru Chos dbang n.d., pp. 83–84), Khu tsha was a great g.Yung drung Bon polymath and Treasure Revealer who also participated in Buddhism (Kongtrul 2007–2008, Vol. 1, pp. 418–420). Yet he was apparently careful not to conflate g.Yung drung Bon with Buddhism, and seems to have made efforts to keep the two traditions separate.

Thus if we look at his *Ka ba nag po's* presentation of g.Yung drung Bon from the perspective of *religious and social identity*, it can accurately be characterised as presenting an entirely independent religion, in important respects with an even lesser degree of lexical intertextuality with tantric Buddhism than the latter sometimes shared with Śaivism. For the *Ka ba nag po* (as far as we can see) shares no passages of text, no liturgical passages, and comparatively few deities, with the rNying ma *Phur pa* tantras, and in addition, its ritual syntax is quite often variant.⁶ Yet if we look at the *Ka ba nag po's* g.Yung drung Bon from the perspective of *doctrine and soteriology*, it can only be described as functionally identical to the rNying ma *Phur pa* tantras, and in this respect is probably more consistently and comprehensively parallel to Buddhism than are any of the Śaiva or other Indian traditions. For even if Bon texts like the *Gling grags* might pillory as false perversions Padmasambhava's tantric traditions, among which *Phur pa* was central, Khu tsha's *Ka ba nag po* is, in most matters of doctrine and ritual grammar, extremely similar.⁷

⁶ Indian Vajrayāna could, for example, share parallel or even identical passages of text with Śaivism, in a way that the *Ka ba nag po* never does with the rNying ma *Phur pa* tantras. See the passages demonstrated by Alexis Sanderson to have been incorporated into the Buddhist *Cakrasamvaratantra* from such Śaiva sources as the *Jayadrathayāmala*, *Picunata*, *Tantrasadbhāvatāntra*, and *Siddhayogēśvarīmata* (See Sanderson 1994, 2001). Of course, the *Ka ba nag po* is just one among many Bon tantras, and it would be rash and premature to generalise from its single example.

⁷ A key part of g.Yung drung Bon narrative is that the Bon preserve in pristine purity, Buddhist teachings that had become perverted in the forms propagated in Tibet as *Chos*. In this respect, one can indeed perhaps discern in the finely made text of the *Ka ba nag po* an attempt to avoid the kind of textual obscurities and poor or crude language present in some Indian tantric materials, and also in some rNying ma *Phur pa* tantras. Likewise, there is perhaps discernible a concern to minimise the incidence of moral ambiguities in the articulation of the *Ka ba nag*

Elsewhere (Cantwell and Mayer 2013), and in contrast to those scholars who have seen g.Yung drung Bon as merely a slavish copy of Buddhism, I have mentioned how Khu tsha reproduces in his *Ka ba nag po* a considerable quantity of indigenous Tibetan ritual symbolism. My current hypothesis is that he saw this as his contribution to a larger generational project of his times, namely, the preservation and propagation of a separate g.Yung drung Bon religious identity, through the production of written Bon sacred texts that were specifically suitable for lamaistic uses. I have mentioned, for example, that one of the ways he achieved this was by maintaining within the *Ka ba nag po* a vast pantheon of non-Indic deities that were generally understood (perhaps in many cases accurately) to have been worshipped in Tibet before the arrival of Buddhism; and yet, in the spirit of tantric pure vision, he could imply these deities to be already fully enlightened in the nirvāṇic Buddhist sense, with no need of further converting or taming. Nevertheless, to emphasise the profound congruence of his system with Buddhist soteriology (as, presumably in his eyes, originally taught by gShen rab), he has at the very centre of his maṅḍala a distinctly Indic type of tantric *yi dam* or *iṣṭadevatā*, albeit adorned with some culturally indigenous embellishments. He was then able to construe his vast pantheons of non-Indic deities as enlightened emanations of this central deity.

In this article, addressed to our volume theme of Tibetan religion and the senses, I will by contrast need to emphasise the non-indigenous, on how Khu tsha promoted a soteriology that was absolutely orthodox in terms of Buddhist doctrine. He had to do this with regard to the senses, because a specific way of understanding them was so fundamental to Buddhist doctrine that it was not in any way negotiable. This was so fundamental that if Khu tsha had introduced any significant changes, he would have incurred the hazard of rendering his views doctrinally non-congruent with Buddhism, which was something he apparently did not want to do.

A central idea within most forms of Buddhism is that the world as experienced through our senses, is delusory, and has no real existence. Not even the senses themselves, nor the person who experiences them, have any real existence. A major purpose of the Buddhadharma is to bring sentient beings to a direct realisation of

po's various doctrines. Yet it would be premature to come to any such conclusions until several more of Khu tsha's *Phur pa* works have been studied, so I have avoided such speculations here, even though I find the topic highly intriguing. Note however that the morally ambiguous *sgröl ba* or 'liberative killing' rituals remain important to the Bon *Phur pa* tradition, just as they are for the rNying ma.

this truth, which is understood as a necessary precondition for any final release from suffering.

I do not yet see much evidence that any such idea, nor its concomitant soteriologies, were independently produced within indigenous Tibetan religions on any wide scale. On the contrary, most evidence suggests that pre-Buddhist Tibetan religions tended towards a more naturalistic understanding of reality and were not primarily focused on a soteriology seeking to dissolve the world as experienced. Insofar as ideas similar to such Buddhist ones were already known in Tibet prior to the eighth century, they might well have been the result of early Buddhist influences from India, China, and Nepal. So by concurring with Buddhism in his doctrinal approach to the senses, Khu tsha was making a statement, privileging a transcendent g.Yung drung Bon over the naturalistic interpretations of the senses more often found in many indigenous Tibetan traditions.

The understanding that our sense perceptions are ultimately delusory pervades most of Buddhism and is foundational to its distinctive *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* cosmology. So long as you believe that this world, as revealed by your sensory data, is real, you are trapped in the endless suffering of *samsāra*; it is only when you finally realise the phenomena revealed by your sensory data are illusory that you can be liberated into the supreme happiness of *nirvāṇa*. We first encounter such ideas about the world of the senses in the most basic strata of Buddhism, within such core doctrines as *pratītya-samutpāda*, or dependent origination, and the twelve *nidānas* or links connected with it. The fifth of these links is the *ṣaḍāyatana*, or six sense bases: eye and vision, ear and hearing, nose and olfaction, tongue and taste, skin and touch, and mind and thought. All twelve of these links or *nidānas*, including of course the six sense bases, are said to stem from *avidyā*, or ignorance. They do not indicate reality.

In Mahāyāna's hugely influential *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, we find much the same devaluation of the senses, although formulated a little differently through a greater emphasis on *śūnyatā* or emptiness: again and again, the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras tell us, there is no eye, nothing is seen, there is no hearing, nothing is heard, and so on through all the six senses.

This outlook, that all phenomena are empty, was highly influential for the Madhyamaka school, established by the two visits of Śāntarakṣita to Tibet in the eighth century as the dominant philosophical tradition there. His famous *Madhyamakālamkāra* deployed Buddhism's 'neither one nor many' logical argumentation to deny any ultimate reality for an external world revealed by the senses—and despite the deprecation of Śāntarakṣita in Bon narratives

such as the *Gling grags*, the *Ka ba nag po* seems specifically to cite this argument. Tibetan tantrism also accepts elements from the Yogācāra school, but they too attacked the reality of sense data through an idealism of non-duality of subject and object. Similarly, the *tathāgatagarbha* or buddha nature strand in Mahāyana understood the six sense bases as part of the incidental defilements of ignorance and passions that temporarily obstructed our true innate enlightened nature. Even more directly important for Khu tsha's formulation of the *Ka ba nag po*, contemporaneous Buddhist tantric literature attacked the reality of ordinary sense data as delusory, defining enlightenment as precisely the transcendence of ordinary appearances, through a purified perception of mundane body, speech, and mind, as buddha body, speech, and mind. Thus, the Buddhist doctrines available to Khu tsha overwhelmingly denied the ultimate reality of ordinary sense perceptions, leaving him little option other than to concur.

In the rest of this paper, I will first present a highly condensed review of Khu tsha's doctrinal understanding of the senses in the *Ka ba nag po*, using some of his own words. After that, I will give examples of how he nevertheless at the more surface level of sensory aesthetics and cultural imagery reproduced numerous indigenous categories as well.

Chapter One of the *Ka ba nag po* (page 5) describes the interlocutor of the tantra, Thugs rje byams ma, ('Loving Compassion'), who bears some resemblance to the Buddhist Tārā, rising from her seat, prostrating to the main deity, and making beautiful sensory offerings of flowers, dance, music, and great delight,⁸ to mKha' 'gying, ('Majestically Poised (in) Space'), the expounder of the tantra, who bears some resemblance to a version of the Buddhist deity Vajrakīla. Then, praising him, she requests him to teach. His response implies that true reality is ineffable and lies beyond the senses (6.7). So, although sense offerings are made by the interlocutor, the main deity explains that reality goes beyond all senses, and this sets the tone: the senses are to be used to transcend the realm of the senses.

E ma ho! The stainless completely pure *bodhicitta*,
 [Is] unchanging, the essence *g.Yung drung* enlightened body,
 [Which is] assured in freedom from effort and striving.
 It cannot be established as single, nor is it divisible into a
 duality;
 It has no partiality and it falls into no extremes;

⁸ [5.1.3] *de nas 'khor de rnams kyi* [1.4] *nang nas// yum lha mo thugs rje byams ma zhes bya bas/ rang gi stan las langs te skor ba dang // lha phyag dang/ me tog dang* [1.5] *gar dang rol mo dang // dgyes pa rol pa chen po'i mchod pa phul nas*

In essence it is unaccomplished, and it transcends everything whatsoever.

It has no colour, no shape, and no characteristics.

It is beyond the range of letters and words.⁹

In Chapter Two, Thugs rje byams ma asks him how, if the true nature [of things] is to be fully pure and unfabricated in this way, does erring into ignorance come about?

In reply, he explains how everything we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think—our entire world of experience—arose through an erring away from primordial wisdom into ignorance. The world of the senses only ever arose because of a falling away from the primordial perfection which is the natural state of things. The senses pertain to the deluded and terrible perceptions of *saṃsāra*. Unfortunately, ignorance just arises, spontaneously. Minds become defiled by it and are seized by darkness and the *māras*, eventually manifesting as the six kinds of fallen sentient beings circling miserably around the three worlds of *saṃsāra*.

The *Ka ba nag po* explains:

(12 l.4-5) “The twelve-fold [cycle of] dependent origination [based on] ignorance goes round...

A stream of perverse cognitions

Adopt the viewpoints of erroneous and obscured karmas of attachment to *saṃsāra*....

(13 l.1-2) The projections of afflicted minds proliferate,

As the delusions of extreme ignorance.

This is like having eaten [the hallucinogenic plant] *datura*,

Or believing the fluffy [white] wool[-like clouds] of the sky [or] a [white] conch shell to be yellow, [through suffering from jaundice];

[One] sees something with one’s eyes, yet does not understand [what one is really seeing];

[And so] becomes tormented by great sufferings.”¹⁰

In Chapter Three, we learn how the Bon *Phur pa* deity mKha’ ’gying gazes down on all suffering beings with wisdom and compassion.

⁹ [6 l.7] *e ma ho/ 'dri med rnam dag byang chub sems/ mi 'gyur thig le g.yung drung skul/ bya* [7 l.1] *brtsal rtsol grub bral ba'i rdeng / gcig tu ma nges gnyis ma phye/ ris su ma chad mthar ma lhung /* [1.2] *ngo bor ma grub ci las 'das/ kha dog dbyibs dang mtshan ma med/ tshig dang yi ge'i spyod yul 'das/*

¹⁰ [12 l.4] *ma rig rten 'brel bcu gnyis 'khor/... phyin ci log gi shis pa'i* (brTen 'gyur: 'du shes) *rgyun/* [1.5] *'gol sgrib 'khor* (brTen 'gyur: 'khor chags) *las la ltas/...* [13 l.1] *nyon mongs yid kyi sprul pa 'gyed/ shin du ma rig rmongs* [1.2] *pa ste/ dper na dha du thang phrom zos/ nam mkha'i bal 'dab dung ser 'dzin/ dmig gis dmigs bzhin ma rtogs pa/ sdug bsngal chen po rnams kyis gdung/*

Thus, the enlightened one looks with compassion on those who have fallen away from reality into the realms of *samsāra* (and the senses) and employs skillful methods to rescue them.

In Chapter Four, we begin to learn about the skillful methods he deploys to rescue beings from the deluded sense perceptions of our every-day conventional reality that constitutes *samsāra*. mKha' 'gying begins to reveal ways of using the deluded senses themselves to escape from the world of the deluded senses. Deluded suffering realms of the senses, described as body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities, are to be returned to their primordial enlightened state by tantric meditations and rituals. Meditation and rituals on the central *Phur pa* deity are given for this purpose. The first stage is the recreation of the phenomenal outer world, not as it ordinarily appears to our delusory senses, but in its true primordial nature as a divine palace of enlightened wisdom and compassion.

In Chapter Five, the process reaches its culmination, with a description of the enlightened deity, in whose divine form the fortunate are henceforth to imagine themselves, for in reality this has been their true nature since beginningless time. It is at this point that Khu tsha brings the *Ka ba nag po* as close as it ever gets to full-on intertextuality with Buddhism, since in generating the visualisation of this main deity, he employs the key rNying ma Buddhist terminology of the *ting 'dzin gsum*, or Three Contemplations. The *ting 'dzin gsum* are extremely well known in rNying ma. They are employed throughout its Mahāyoga genre, where their presence is understood as an authoritative seal of doctrinal orthodoxy. The three contemplations serve as a three-stage method of envisaging the emanation of the meditational deity out of the formless absolute nature known as the *dharmakāya*, through its inconceivable radiant expression as the blissful *samboghakāya*, down to its embodiment in form as the more accessible *nirmāṇakāya* deity, upon which latter even the confused mind of an ordinary meditator is able to focus. Just as there could be no more convincing evidence of Khu tsha's resolve to conform with basic Buddhist doctrine than his mention of the twelve links of dependent origination or *pratītyasamutpāda*; or of his commitment to conform to Madhyamaka philosophy through his citation of Buddhism's 'neither one nor many' reasoning that had been so influential for Śāntarakṣita; so also there can be no more convincing evidence of his resolve to conform to rNying ma Vajrayāna doctrines than his adoption of the *ting 'dzin gsum*.

We have just seen how Chapters One to Five of the *Ka ba nag po* serve to lay out its Buddhist-congruent doctrinal structures. By contrast, Chapters Six to Twelve introduce a series of deity groupings that were in all likelihood envisaged as indigenous. Many of them

invoke a powerful aesthetic which seems to reference indigenous Tibetan beliefs. Often family genealogies are supplied for these deities, specifying parents and grandparents and great grandparents, as well as siblings and spouses and children. Such genealogies are rarer in Indic Vajrayāna sources. Nevertheless, we also find occasional reference to categories, such as *rākṣasas* and *yakṣas*, that first originated in Indic cultures, but which of course subsequently also proliferated right across Asia, including the Far East.

The first of these indigenous deities are the Seven Fierce Hawks (*dbal gyi khra bdun*) of Chapter Six. Their enlightened nature is described in orthodox tantric Buddhist doctrinal terms: *From out of the emptiness that is nothing whatsoever, The natural quality of the sky[like nature] and expanse [of the mind], with its spatial field, Becomes established as the body, speech, and mind of the Hawk Divinity.*¹¹ Yet a distinctly indigenous aesthetic is still preserved, one that gives a nod towards a more naturalistic imagery: after living six months together in their bird's nest on a mountain peak, a *khyung* and hawk couple manage to produce some eggs, which they lovingly guard for the incubation period of three months, after which their little chicks are hatched. These become the Seven Hawk deities. They in turn produce further hawk emanations, which in turn produce yet further hawk emanations, until they are countless. All are in nature the expression of the enlightened compassion and activity of the buddhas.

Chapter Seven introduces the Five Fierce Wolf deities (*dbal gyi gcan spyang lnga*), associated with the five families, five directions, five colours, and five wisdoms. Again, their Buddhistically enlightened nature is emphasized, along with an indigenous naturalistic aesthetic: long long ago, the divine wolves were emanated from the non-dual enlightened state, but not into some abstract *sambhogakāya* heaven or Indian-style tantric charnel ground as Buddhist deities might be, but rather onto a mountain peak with fresh water springs on its slopes. There they mated with the Hawk Deities of the previous chapter, who laid eggs that hatched as chimeras with wolf bodies and hawk wings (*khra spyang*). As Charles Ramble (2014) has shown us, chimeric deities of this sort are a very prominent and characteristic trope in indigenous Tibetan religion; and as Dan Martin (*Tibeto-Logic* blog, March 10, 2014) has described, bird-canine conflation in particular are a well-known motif in Tibetan folklore. Yet in the *Ka ba nag po*, even these Wolf-Hawk chimeras are enlightened in the Buddhistic sense: *'The greatness of their enlightened qualities is inconceivable. They are endowed with might*

¹¹ [25 1.6] // *ji yang med pa'i stong pa las/ mkha' klong dbyings kyi rang bzhin gyis/ khra [1.7] gsas sku gsung thugs su grub/*

and a great number of magic powers. They subdue the wrong views of the demons of the five defilements, no need to mention the enemies and obstacles. Their enlightened action tames each of those who are karmically destined to be tamed."¹²

Chapter Eight introduces the Earth Mistresses, or *Sa bdag mo*, who arise from various lakes. In this way they resembling the troublesome Himalayan local goddesses of similar designation (*Sa bdag ma* or *bSe mo*) that were tamed by Padmasambhava in the Dunhuang *Phur pa* text PT44.¹³ These goddesses went on to play a prominent role in subsequent rNying ma mythology, not least as prime objects of taming. The *Sa bdag ma* or *bSe mo* of the rNying ma narratives often share with their Bon counterparts in the *Ka ba nag po* the attribute of being born from various kinds of oceans. The story of Padmasambhava taming some *Sa bdag ma* at Yang le shod became a popular charter myth or *rabs* for the rNying ma *Phur pa* tradition. The narrative was quite likely used in exactly that way by Buddhists in Khu tsha's own direct environment.¹⁴ Of course, from Buddhism's absolute viewpoint, such unruly deities in need of taming are at the same time primordially pure, so that from the point of view of tantric pure vision, they can nevertheless be regarded as emanations of the buddhas. Buddhist sources (such as the '*Bum nag*) can thus sometimes describe them as worldly (Cantwell and Mayer 2008, page 46, note 25), and at other times (for example in many ritual texts), as transcendent.¹⁵ Here, the *Ka ba nag po*'s *Sa bdag mo* are in no need of taming, because they are portrayed as originally enlightened

¹² (29 L.7) *che ba'i yon tan bsam mi khyab / mthu dpung stobs dang ldan par 'gyur / nyon mongs bdud lnga log rtogs 'dul / dgra dang bgegs la smos ci dgos / 'phrin las rang skal 'dul bar byed /*

¹³ See Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 41–67.

¹⁴ We first encounter a complete version of this important rNying ma *rabs* in the probably early 11th century Dunhuang text PT44. More directly, there is also a reference to the narrative in Guru Chos dbang's *gTer 'byung chen mo* (p. 86); the same text at another juncture also mentions Khu tsha himself (p. 136). Khu tsha and Chos dbang's families knew of each other and lived in the same region of Southern Tibet.

¹⁵ Charles Ramble has made the interesting observation that in Nepal, as well as signifying deities, the terms *bSe* and *Saiñ* can also refer to ethnic groups. He writes: "*bSe* is a very interesting term. It does appear as part of the name of some gods (most notably *A bse*), but I'm not sure if I've seen it as a separate category. *Se/bSe* is the name of an ethnic group, and the Newars still refer to the Tamangs who live around their settlements in Kathmandu as *Saiñ*; it's used in certain contexts not just of the Tamangs but others in that language group, such as the Gurungs and Thakalis (who speak *Se-skad*, and lived in a place called *Se-rib*), so Padmasambhava's conquests in Pharping could possibly be a reference to the conversion of some indigenous population." Personal communication, 21st December, 2018.

emanations. They are in fact the daughters of an emanation of the central *Phur pa* deity, an Earth Master or *Sa bdag* called Tsang tsang, who is fully enlightened. Thus it is from Tsang tsang that all the forms of *saṃsāra* arose, and his wife the Earth Mistress Pervasive Emptiness is an emanation of the enlightened goddess Thugs rje byams ma.¹⁶

Indigenous-seeming groupings of deities can show elements of Indic terminology: for example, among the hosts of Black Thu lum¹⁷ Ladies (*thu lum nag mo*) of Chapter Eleven, who are a type of *bdud* deity, we find the more Indic Thu lum with the Head of an Action Rākṣasī (*Thu lum las kyi srin mo gdong*), amongst colleagues with distinctively Tibetan ethnonyms, such as Thu lum with a Mon Sparking head (*Thu lum mon gyi tshwa tshwa gdong*).

Chapter Twelve is devoted to more *bdud* deities, who are not in this text assimilated to the Indian *māras*, as we sometimes find in Buddhist texts. Rather, the *bdud* too are activity emanations of the enlightened deity. Some seem to explicitly reference indigenous categories such as *bse* or *mi rgod*, for example Black Female Sé Gloomy Locks (*Nag mo bse'i ral 'thib ma*), or Black Female Disaster Dūd who Rides the Three-legged Sé Horse (*Nag mo phung bdud bse rta rkang gsum zhon*), or Black Female with a Bear's Head who Rides a Yeti (*Nag mo dred gdongs mi rgod zhon*). Others yield us no certain signs either way, such as Disastrous Nine-Faced Dūd Son (*Phung byed kha dgu bdud kyi bu*), or Northern Dūd Mad Crazy Master of Inflicting Anthrax/Ulcer disorders (*Byang bdud bsnyo 'bog lhog bkal bdag*). Yet others must of course reference an Indic understanding of the *Phur*

¹⁶ [3-1.3] *dbal bon yab kyi sprul pa* [4] *las/ sa bdag tsang tsang 'khor ba byung / thugs rje byams ma'i cho 'phrul las/ sa bdag stong khyab yum chen byung/ de gnyis rol pa'i sras mo lnga/*

'From the emanations of the father dBal bon, The Earth Master Tsang Tsang Cyclic existence arose. From the miraculous display of Thugs rje byams ma, The Earth Mistress the great mother sTong khyab (Pervasive Emptiness) arose. From the frolicking of these two, [arose] five daughters.'

¹⁷ *Thu lum* is a term that has no precise English equivalent. Dan Martin has shown it to be a loanword of Turkic origins. In general, it refers to anything rolled up, especially a metal ingot. However in this particular context, it might also refer more specifically to the Buddhist literary trope of a blazing red-hot iron or metal ball which the denizens of hell are compelled to eat as food, a hellish counterpart to the Indian ritual food ball known as *pindaḥ*. The *Tshig mdzod chen mo* and some other dictionaries perhaps incorrectly give the meaning of *thu lum* as hammer (*tho ba*). Perhaps more accurately, the Negi Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionary Vol. 5, page 2020, gives *pindaḥ* as primary meaning of *thu lum*. A more accurate and nuanced understanding than the *Tshig mdzod chen mo* can be found in Dan Martin's *TibVocab*. Thanks to Dan Martin and Lama Jabb for clarifying these issues.

pa, such as Bloodless Dumb Male who Strikes with a Molten Metal Phurpa (*Khrag med lkugs pa khro chu'i phur pa 'debs*), although here we must also take note that the term *phur pa* might well have had indigenous ritual meanings that predated the various imported Buddhist meanings attached to the terms *kīla* or *kīlaka* etc. (Grimaud et Grimaud 2017). It remains to be seen how many of the scores of indigenous-sounding deity names in the *Ka ba nag po* represent pre-existent deity names used in previous indigenous Tibetan ritual, and how many might have been developed within the discourse of g.Yung drung Bon to fit an indigenous-seeming niche: at the moment, we have little indication either way.

There are several further classes of indigenous deities, such as the innumerable *sMan gcig ma* or Unique Enchantresses, with names such as Unique Enchantress of the Combined Great Highland Pastures (*'Brog chen 'dus pa'i sman cig ma*), or Snowy Cliffs [and] Meadows Unique Enchantress (*g.Ya' spang gangs kyi sman cig ma*). In addition there are individual deities who are probably indigenous, such as Celestial Ancestress Heavenly Queen (*gNam phyi gung gyal*), who occurs also in the *gNag rabs* text from the *dGa' thang Bum pa* collection (Bellezza 2014, p. 174; *gNag rabs* IIa (3.6–4.1)). But I have no time to enumerate any further deity classes or individual deities here.

The main point about all these deities, and the reason for their inclusion in the *Ka ba nag po*, is that they are to be visualised in ritual. Visualisations are primarily understood as mental objects, to be perceived by the mental faculty. But since the deities must also be accurately painted in *thangkas*, it follows that both mind and sight are in any case engaged in their contemplation. And it is this visualisation which constitutes the main engagement of the senses in the famous Bon rituals for which the *Ka ba nag po* serves as the textual source. For like any other tantric system of its kind, however magnificent and complex might be the sensory engagements with paintings, statues, musical instruments, hand gestures, ritual clothing, dance, incense, tasteable sacred substances, and the like, it is visualisation that remains a preeminent method of practice.

In addition to the indigenous deities for visualisation, and their naturalistic environments, *Khu tsha* occasionally invokes other more contextual indigenous imagery too. For example, in Chapter Four, he uses the imagery of the Tibetan landscape term *rdza*, which indicates a particular kind of rock formation.¹⁸ Likewise, in Chapter Twenty Five, the longevity ritual, he prescribes the making of a *'brang rgyas*,

¹⁸ [19.5] *gdan la khro bo khro mo rdza ltar lhag /*, “The male and female wrathful ones upon [their] thrones are densely ranked like a series of imposing rocky mountain peaks”.

an indigenous form of food offering to be both seen and tasted,¹⁹ as the main material basis of the rite (for an analysis and translation of this chapter, see Cantwell and Mayer 2015).

In this way, we can see that while Khu tsha accepts Buddhist philosophical and doctrinal understandings of the senses, he is simultaneously keen to direct them onto sense objects that have in many cases a calculatedly indigenous aspect. Thus, a wholly Buddhist-congruent soteriological structure is comprehensively draped in a richly textured indigenous clothing, so that while losing themselves in the contemplation of often indigenous Tibetan forms, practitioners can nevertheless achieve fully Buddhist realisations. Once again, we are strongly reminded of our previous observation (Cantwell and Mayer 2013): in the terms of the schema developed by the Hebraist Peter Schäfer, while many of the lemmata from which the *Ka ba nag po* is constructed have a calculatedly indigenous appearance, its choice of component microforms, and the overall conception of the macroform as a whole, are predominantly Buddhist.

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¹⁹ *’Brang rgyas* occur in Buddhist rituals too, with *tshes yi ’brang rgyas* as one of the main types, but it seems likely the *’brang rgyas* was originally an indigenous form, rather than an Indic one. I am not aware of any Indic precedent, and Sa skya Paṇḍita in his *sDom gsum rab dbye* specified the *’brang rgyas* as a ritual item for which he could find no Indic example. See Martin 2001: 63, note 31.

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Embodying the divine in tantric ritual practice: examples from the Chinese Karakhoto manuscripts from the Tangut empire (ca. 1038–1227)*

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Belatedly, but gratefully dedicated to Heiner Roetz.

1. Theme

According to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, enlightened beings are said to be omnipresent, all-pervading like space and enduring much beyond the *parinirvāṇa* of the historical Buddha. However, this Mahāyāna-type ideal is rather difficult to fathom, i.e. it has to be experienced; nonetheless, it becomes more concrete and maybe easier to comprehend in the performance of a (Tantric) ritual context—where buddhas, bodhisattvas and meditational deities (Tib. *yi dam*) are localized in a *specific* time and place, and in *specific* objects such as images, *stūpas* or even within one’s own body. As Yael Bentor, among others, has already shown,¹ it is by means of a consecration ritual that an ordinary object is transmuted into an enlightened being or a Buddha. Its sacred presence within the realm of *samsāra* then allows human beings to continue to interact with such enlightened beings—be it through aspirational prayer and worship, for apotropaic reasons, or as a means to accumulate merit, even attaining supreme, soteriological goals.

In this context I use the distinction made by Robert Sharf to employ the term ‘icon’ for such a “specific sort of religious image that is believed to partake or participate in the substance of that which it

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¹ Bentor 1996a.

represents. In other words, an icon does not merely bear the likeness of the divine but shares in its very nature."² This is how Buddhists found their way to overcome the gap between the signifier and the signified—that any such pure object, non-referential by nature, is believed to be inherent in the sign itself.

Thus, a consecrated icon (or any other consecrated item) becomes an *expression of an ongoing enlightened process*.³ Once a Buddhist image is transformed from simple likeness to divine presence (or enlightened nature) by means of consecration, it is reiterated through regular invocation rituals so that the divine presence is perpetuated within the icon⁴ and within this realm of *samsāra*. And it is in these very rites that we may discern the intimate relationship that is established between the divinity on the one hand, in a divine icon in this case, and the (Tantric) Buddhist practitioner on the other.

However, the more crucial question remains to be dealt with: How does the Tantric practitioner herself or himself subsequently, actually come to embody the divine? The divinity (in an icon) is usually attributed with a body, senses and sensibility just like a human being⁵—I will present a concrete example further down. Although the human aspects of divine incarnations or icons are very prominent in Tantric Buddhism, they are at the same time given a transcendental dimension surpassing time and space, so that the divinity seems to have a foot in both worlds, in this one and in the transcendental one, inviting the practitioner to follow her or his footsteps as well.

For a Tantric practitioner the textual description of the divine being, as it is commonly found in a ritual manual is the main source for building first of all a devotional representation of this very sensual deity. A ritual manual features a normative description of the divinity in her sacred space and an instruction on how to activate her divine presence in this world and in one's own body through a stereotyped performance. Rituals in a narrower sense are patterns for action and organisation which are usually consciously created, following a certain set of rules, and are relatively stable and rich in their symbolism, yet may be continuously adjusted through performance and

² Sharf 1999: 75–99; the quote is found on p. 81.

³ This is quite similar to what John Strong has proposed for relics, namely, to view relics as “expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographical process.” See Strong 2004: 5.

⁴ Sharf 1999: 82.

⁵ Colas 2014: 52–63, here particularly p. 54.

actualisation.⁶ Furthermore, a religious ritual has the specific quality of being embedded in a soteriological context; i.e., it aims at providing a means to salvation. Therefore, I suggest that in our context it is through ritual performance with a strong sense of devotion that the identification of an icon as a living one possessing body and senses arises. What is crucial, however, is that a religious ritual, simply by focusing on a prescribed action, schematizes sensory experiences in a new way: It deviates from everyday, subjective, sensory experiences in order to get to a divine, non-subjective, non-referential, yet sensorial, fully integrative experience. Within the frame of the ritual action, the sensory orientation of the practitioner is diverted from ordinary objects and subjective emotions, and instead the senses are directed to the deity herself; ideally, the ritual action is said to be free from any ordinary sensual emotions. Such a view is said to enable the practitioner to obtain the mental and physical perception of the deity through non-ordinary senses with the result that the external icon and the image of the deity are united within the body of the practitioner herself or himself.⁷ Thus the senses are the interface between the practitioner's body on the one hand and the divine environment on the other. The result of such ritual action, the divine presence within one's own body, is said to be actualized by continuously carrying out the prescribed action.

I would like to exemplify this point by looking at specific Tantric, Chinese-language, ritual manuals transmitted in the 12th century within the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227, known as Xixia 西夏 in Chinese sources). These manuals are found in the Karakhoto Manuscript Collection—a collection which probably evidences the earliest extensive transmissions of Tantric materials, and particularly ritual manuals, transmitted from Tibetan to Chinese.⁸ The texts I will present are ritual manuals concerning meditation on the female deity Vajravārāhī (Tib. rDo rje phag mo, Chin. Jingang haimu 金剛亥母). Here, I will present a close reading of passages relevant to the senses and analyze how a transcendental/divine sphere is constructed within the text, and how a practitioner is guided to induce the described transformative experience within herself or himself—namely, how the

⁶ I follow here the definition of ritual provided in Brosius, Michaels and Schrode 2013: 15.

⁷ Colas 2014: 55, 57.

⁸ Although a great number of Tantric materials are available in the Dunhuang Collection of manuscripts (see e.g. Eastman 1983, Dalton and van Schaik 2006), which predates the Karakhoto manuscripts, to my current knowledge the majority of such texts is transmitted in Tibetan language and not as systematically and broadly in Chinese.

practitioner, like the deity in the icon, is also transformed into an enlightened being, i.e. that the practitioner is actually able to embody the divine.

2. *Chinese Tantric Manuscripts from the Karakhoto Collection*

Let me briefly sketch the historical context underlying the materials presented here as a way of introduction. After the demise of the Tibetan Empire in 842 the truly cosmopolitan and multi-cultural oases on the periphery of the former Tibetan dominion in Eastern Central Asia, with a long history of documented Buddhist exchanges, came under the local rule of various ethnic groups. The Tibetan language continued to be practiced as a *lingua franca* at least for two more centuries—a fact that is evidenced in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts.⁹ Eventually, the Tanguts established their kingdom in the first half of the 11th century with its centre along the great bend of the Yellow River, but also conquering the oasis of Dunhuang at the westernmost fringes of their territory. Over the course of two centuries the Tanguts acted as outstanding patrons of Buddhism, of both the Sinitic and Tibetan varieties.¹⁰ The presence of (Tibetan) Tantric masters at the Tangut court in the 12th century¹¹ and Tangut, Chinese, and Tibetan Tantric texts document that Tibetan Tantric Buddhism continued to be practiced by Central Asian people far beyond the Tibetan cultural and religious influence of the region, and in fact, played a major role in a process of (cultural and religious) exchange on an international scale.¹²

The collection of manuscripts from Karakhoto was discovered by the Russian explorer Koslov in 1907 together with around 3500 objects

⁹ For Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang see e.g. Dalton and van Schaik 2006. Given the evidence of Tibetan manuscripts from Karakhoto which postdate the Dunhuang Collection, it is not unlikely that Tibetan continued to be used among Tantric Buddhist communities in Eastern Central Asia, in fact, much beyond the 11th century. Takeuchi and Iuchi (2016: 10) have dated the Tibetan texts from Karakhoto provisionally to three time periods: the 11th to 12th c., the 12th to 13th c., and the 13th to 15th c.

¹⁰ For the dual Buddhist orientation of the Tangut rulers, see Linrothe 1995.

¹¹ An overview of activities at the Tangut court, including the presence of Tibetan masters, is provided in numerous articles by Ruth Dunnell, e.g. Dunnell 1992, 2009, 2011.

¹² A catalog of Tibetan texts from Karakhoto can be found in Takeuchi and Iuchi 2016. Chinese manuscripts from Karakhoto are available here: Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998.

in and around *stūpas* at the outpost of Karakhoto in the northern periphery of the Tangut Empire.¹³ The majority of the texts are Buddhist in their contents: 220 out of 374 Tangut texts (according to the catalog by Kychanov)¹⁴ and 284 out of 331 Chinese texts have Buddhist content.¹⁵ The Tantric materials are particularly valuable for documenting the story of Tantric Buddhism in the Tangut Kingdom. Among these the Chinese Tantric manuscripts represent the very first transmission of Tantric materials from Tibetan to Chinese currently available to us at all. According to the Russian scholar Kirill Solonin the manuscripts of Tantric Buddhist content mirror the popular aspect of Buddhism in the Tangut Empire¹⁶ and were primarily transmitted through Tibetan masters.

Shen Weirong has already pointed to the great popularity of the Vajravārāhī cult in the Tangut Empire.¹⁷ Among the Chinese Karakhoto manuscripts are numerous texts related to it, some of which are not easily identified on the basis of their titles alone. The same holds true for the Tangut manuscripts.¹⁸ The easily identifiable manuscripts are the following five texts found in the publication by Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov:

- (1) A 14 *Jinganghaimu jilun gongyang cidu lu* 金剛亥母集輪供養次第錄 [Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 5, pp. 241–244 (1–7));
- (2) A 19 *Jingang haimu chanding* 金剛亥母禪定 [The Meditation on

¹³ For a good recent introduction to the site and maps of Karakhoto see Takeuchi and Iuchi 2016: 3–18.

¹⁴ Kychanov 1999.

¹⁵ Shen 2010: 344.

¹⁶ At a presentation during an internal meeting of the team members of the ERC project BuddhistRoad on February 13th, 2018 in Bochum, Kirill Solonin differentiated three dimensions of Buddhism in the Tangut Empire: (1) official Buddhism as represented in the Tangut Law Code with mainly Chinese Mahāyāna *sūtras*, discovered in Karakhoto as printed books; (2) imperial Buddhism with its connection to the Maitreya cult, also transmitted in printed books; and (3) popular Buddhism with ritual manuals related to various Tantric deities and other materials, preserved mostly as manuscripts (from Karakhoto). However, I add to Kirill Solonin's classification that Tantric materials were also practiced in elite circles, i.e. by the emperor. I provide an example of this in my forthcoming publication, Meinert 2019. It thus seems that the boundaries between the three sections would have been extremely porous.

¹⁷ Only the Mahākāla cult seems to have been equally popular. See Shen 2010: 348. It should be further pointed out that we find the first evidences of the Vajravārāhī cult in Eastern Central Asia in the manuscripts from Karakhoto. There are no traces of the cult in the Dunhuang materials.

¹⁸ According to a conversation with Kirill Solonin, about 30 texts belong to the Vajravārāhī system.

Vajravārāhī] (vol. 5, pp. 257–258 (1–4));

(3) Q 249, Q 327 *Jingang haimu xiuxiyi* 金剛亥母修習儀 [Ritual of the Yogic Practice of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, pp. 106–108 (1–5));

(4) no. 274, *Jingang haimu lue shishi yi* 金剛亥母略施食儀 [Ritual of Food-Offering to Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, pp. 275 (1–2, 8/1–8/2));

(5) no. 274 *Jingang haimu zisheshou yaomen* 金剛亥母自攝授要門 [The Quintessential Instruction of Self-Blessing of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, p. 276 (1–2, 8/3–8/4)).¹⁹

Before I turn to the contents of some of these manuscripts, one other point is of importance. Considering the fact that that these manuscripts, together with printed texts and other visual objects were stored in and around *stūpas* in Karakhoto, a well-known and widespread Buddhist practice, one may consider what the embodied significance of these religious objects were. I suggest that such stored objects may serve three functions: they (1) preserve knowledge; (2) lend an aura to a religious site; and (3) have an inherent transformative function.

We may assume that the people responsible for the consecration of the *stūpas* in Karakhoto did not think about the aspect of preservation of knowledge in the first place when storing religious objects in a Buddhist site, e.g. on the occasion of a funerary practice. However, it turns out that an auxiliary effect of their activities is that such objects provide us today with a window into materials that constituted central features of their religious lives and practices.

With regard to the second suggested function, it is worthwhile to consider what the practical and religious implications for placing religious objects into such *stūpas* were. Just as a consecrated *stūpa* is regarded as a representation of the body of the Buddha on the level of absolute truth, its being filled with Buddhist scriptures represents the Buddha's teachings and the scriptures may be seen as "the bases for the realization of Buddhist ideas and accumulation of merit on the level of relative truth."²⁰ They serve as an inspiration for the

¹⁹ Shen 2010: 349. In February this year (2018) this author read and translated another Chinese manuscript related to the Vajravārāhī cult with Shen Weirong during his visit to Bochum: TK 329 *Sizi kongxingmu* 四字空行母 [The Four Syllable-*dākinī*], published in Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, pp. 116–120 (1–9). Attention to this manuscript was first brought to the fore by Sun Penghao 2012. This manuscript is a Chinese commentary to a Vajravārāhī text which probably had the Sanskrit title *Vajrayoginīsiddhi* (cf. fol. 4, line 7/8 of the manuscript). It is not clear yet whether this commentary was produced directly in Chinese or whether it is a translation from another language (e.g. a Tibetan or Tangut commentary).

²⁰ Bentor 1996b: 303.

practitioner and lend an aura to the site, charging it with religious meaning. Yael Bentor has also pointed out on the basis of textual evidence from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that scriptural fillings of *stūpas*—as one type of relic, namely as relics of the *dharma*—may be seen as part of a process of approaching a transcendental reality and enabling the continuous interaction with the Buddha beyond his *parinirvāṇa*,²¹ regardless of whether the context of the scriptures is known or even understood. These are, in fact, as John Strong convincingly argued for any type of relic, a means to continue the powerful narrative of the biography of the Buddha beyond his *parinirvāṇa*²² and allow the Buddhist community to approach him.

Thirdly, the very contents of the scriptures represent the mind of the Buddha, an enlightened mind which is thought to possess an inherent transformational power. I suggest that we regard such scriptures placed in consecrated *stūpas*, and thereby any consecrated religious object, as having an agency in themselves²³—even without being actively used. I would tend to regard it as a type of dormant agency, agency defined as the potential to transform the world²⁴ and the mind of the practitioner.

This third function is particularly important for my argumentation. Because the above mentioned Chinese ritual manuals related to the Vajravārāhī cult from Buddhist monuments in Karakhoto do show, in fact, traces of usage, we may assume that the content of the ritual

²¹ Bentor 1994: 16.

²² Strong 2004: 17.

²³ In recent years there has been a debate in scholarship on the 'agency of objects'. It is discussed e.g. in Knappett 2005: 29: "Agency is not something we confer on objects in a one-way relationship; it emerges reciprocally as humans and nonhumans merge." See also Knappett 2008: 146–154 for a discussion of the term 'material agency'. Most influential in this debate is certainly the work by Bruno Latour who broadened the concept of agency previously only reserved for humans to the non-human realm by applying the term 'actant' for any type of source of action. The presence of any human or non-human factor may alter the course of some other's action, with its absence leading to different results (Latour 2005: 54, 71). According to his view, objects are no longer acted upon and attributed with meanings by humans; they are relational in the sense that they are acted upon as well as acting in exchange with other human and non-human actants. Latour's analysis is further developed by Jane Bennett (2016) who argues on the basis of an object-oriented theory in favor of potencies of matter above and beyond the realm of human endeavor. Moreover, for a recent study discussing in great detail the agency of objects in Tantric Buddhist ritual practice see Gentry 2017, particularly pp. 1–29 (introduction) for an overview of related theories.

²⁴ Sax 2013: 28.

manuals was actually practiced,²⁵ thereby allowing their inherent transformative power to be activated before they were stored in a Buddhist site, i.e. used for ritual practice. Among the signs of usage are certain highlights (or crossing outs?), corrections, writing beyond the margin, and most importantly, interlinear insertions. Whereas sometimes insertions seem to have been done as corrections of characters (maybe by a proofreader?), others could have only been prepared by someone knowledgeable in the ritual practice as a meaningful addition to the context. I will provide a concrete example below (fig. 1).

3. Senses and Ritual: Karakhoto Manuscripts Related to the Meditation on Vajravārāhī

Turning to the contents of the abovementioned ritual manuals related to Vajravārāhī we may discern two ways in which Buddhist practitioners could interact with the divinity: on the individual level and on the communal level. The former, the individual dimension of the soteriological function, is represented in the following three ritual manuals: (2) *Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, (3) *Ritual of the Yogic Practice of Vajravārāhī*, and (5) *The Quintessential Instruction of Self-Blessing of Vajravārāhī*. Meant as a regular (or even daily) exercise, these practices demand a certain degree of discipline and thus influence the conduct of the practitioner's life. The latter, the social dimension of the soteriological function, is found in the following two ritual manuals: (1) *Stages of Making Feast Offerings to Vajravārāhī*, and (4) *Ritual of Food Offering to Vajravārāhī*. These are conducted only on specific dates of the month and need different framing and certainly aim at strengthening the Tantric community as such. There is a lot more to discover about these categories, though it should be sufficient for the present purpose to mention that we find references to the senses in both types of ritual manuals. I will present one example from each

²⁵ It should be noted, however, that we have no exact information of how these texts were used historically and there might have been considerable variations of usage by different readers. It is nonetheless noteworthy that we do have visual depictions of deities within the Karakhoto Collection that match quite well the textual descriptions. E.g. the description of Vajravārāhī as I present it in the translation of the text (2) *Meditation on Vajravārāhī* below, can be found in numerous thangkas of the deity from Karakhoto, e.g. x2393, mentioned in my forthcoming article Meinert 2019 (fig. 10.9).

category, from texts (2) and (1).

Ritual Manual for Individual Use: Example of text (2) Meditation on Vajravārāhī

In the ritual manual *Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, we can already see how the senses are to be employed by the practitioner as a means of contact with the divinity in order to attain results through the ritual performance, namely, salvation through the activation of the deity's potential within one's own very body. I will exemplify how the senses of *sight* and *sound* are used here in the description of a visualization process:

After the practitioner has done some preparatory actions (including the taking of refuge, the generation of *bodhicitta*, the visualization of the root guru), a stereotyped performance is required in vividly generating the presence of the *ḍākinī*. Here, the visualization is based on *insight*, which does not involve sight of external phenomena, but an internal vision. However, if the practitioner follows the prescriptive performance correctly, it is said that the sense of sight will be transformed, leading to a new way of seeing, a divine sight. The text reads as follows, giving a procedure that should be quite familiar to a scholar of Tibetan ritual manuals:

[One should visualize oneself and] immediately turn into Vajravārāhī. She is naked, of red colour, has two faces, two arms, and each face has three eyes. Her hair is hanging down loosely on the back. Her right face is a boar head and the left face is a wrathful face. The right boar head looks upwards, the left wrathful face looks downwards.²⁶

As mentioned above, the deity clearly has a human appearance—at least at first glance (one human face, arms, legs, long hair hanging down her back etc.). However, she also has a super-human or transcendental dimension surpassing time and space connected to her appearance: a second face, a boar's face, three eyes—the wisdom eyes opened, etc. It is this very dual appearance and capacity that allows her—and once the transformational power of the ritual manual is activated, the accomplished practitioner as well—to go beyond this world to a transcendental one to embody the divine.

If we move on in the ritual manual, we encounter a further description of her likings—just like a human being she has preferences

²⁶ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 1.5–1.8).

as well: Vajravārāhī likes a vajra blade, she likes to drink blood, she loves to dance, she is fearless, and overall is a pretty strong lady.

On the forehead she wears a five-skull crown. She bites the teeth together. The right hand holds the *vajra* chopper, in her left hand she holds a skull cup filled with blood, and it looks like as if she is drinking it. On the left side she is holding a Tantric staff (Skt. *khaṭvāṅga*). The crown is adorned with an eight-spoked wheel (?); earrings, necklace, bracelet and armband, belt and so on are all made of human bones. The left leg is bent, the right is lifted, like in a dancing gesture. She is standing on a corpse and a sun disc.

Her body is soft, her appearance is so perfect with her nine characteristics: The first is a body with three characteristics, namely [her body is] enchanting, strong, and wrathful. Then three speech characteristics, namely [she is] laughing *ha ha*, yelling *hi hi*, and threatening *hu hu*. Then the three mind characteristics, namely [she is] kind, very sharp, and extraordinary. These are her nine characteristics.

From each pore of the whole body emanates red flaming lights (?). She is surrounded by a flaming mandorla like the fire at the end of the *kalpa* [which will destroy the whole world]; visualize like this.²⁷

And it is this presence of a powerful deity which is induced in the practitioner as well. This enables the practitioner to access the following second step (the most crucial passage in the ritual text), namely the description of how to attain accomplishment within this very body. Here we have a description of a sensory, fully integrated bodily experience.

Then [in Vajravārāhī's navel is] a triangle. And in the four corners of the intermediate directions of the triangle are bliss swirls with multiple colours.²⁸ On the triangles visualise the three syllables AN A HONG [唵阿吽 om āḥ hūṃ] and on their left side, there is the syllable BANG [𑖀 baṃ] surrounded counter clockwise by the HE [合 ha] syllable mantra.²⁹

It is striking how the sound of seed syllables comes into play here. Anyone familiar with Tantric ritual manuals knows that deities or in

²⁷ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 1.9–2.2).

²⁸ The text is here illegible, and it seems that the passage in light grey was highlighted on purpose, much as Tibetans still do by highlighting important sections in a ritual manual (or the section was crossed out—but for what reason?). The reading is a guess. Cf. below fig. 1, line 3.

²⁹ Here is meant the mantra of Vajravārāhī. Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 2.3–2.4).

certain cases entire worlds are generated from such syllables.³⁰ Sounds are generally used to stimulate and embody religious feelings. They can be conceived of as the 'performative embeddings' that stage and perform their cultural meanings in rituals and capture the imagination of the reader or practitioner.³¹

If we move on in the text, we get to the most crucial passage, namely, that which describes a thoroughly bodily experience of the divine. The instruction reads as follows (again highlights and interpolations in the manuscript are written in grey):

Hold up the lower part³² [energy], close down the upper energy³³, then swiftly turn the triangle³⁴ [in the navel] counter clockwise. Because of the power of turning the surrounding *mantra* syllables red lights emanate. These touch the syllable BANG [𑖀 baṃ], then from the syllable BANG also emanate red [lights]. [...highlighted passage not readable...]

United in the central channel [the lights] go upward, touch the great bliss *cakra* [= crown *cakra*] HONG [頤 hūṃ]³⁵ syllable. Then the drop of white and cool *bodhicitta* melts down, and immediately one visualizes the emptiness and great bliss [experience of union].³⁶

Here the ritual describes the union of emptiness and bliss: What is meant here is, in fact, the unity of the empty and luminous nature of mind experienced on a bodily level. The ritual manual seems to guide the practitioner not to grasp the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of the cultivation of wisdom (emptiness) and compassion (actualisation) intellectually as a philosophical doctrine, but instead to experience it in one's own body—very sensually.

³⁰ It is interesting that the Tibetan script is *not* used for 'sacred sounds' (as was done, for instance, in translations of Tibetan Tantric texts into Chinese in the 1930s to 1950s). A number of examples of Tibetan seed syllables used in Chinese translations of Tibetan Tantric texts from the 1930s to 1950s are provided in Zhou Shaoliang and Lü Tiegang 1995.

³¹ Michaels and Wulf 2014: 14.

³² That means to close the lower *cakras*.

³³ That is, to close the breathing from the nose.

³⁴ There is again a passage highlighted in fol. 2.5 which, however, is not readable.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that in the texts two different characters are found for the representation of the Sanskrit sound hūṃ, namely here in the interpolation the character 頤 and in the above quoted passage 𑖀 (see footnote 27 above). Could this be a hint that maybe more than one person edited the text?

³⁶ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 2.5–2.8).

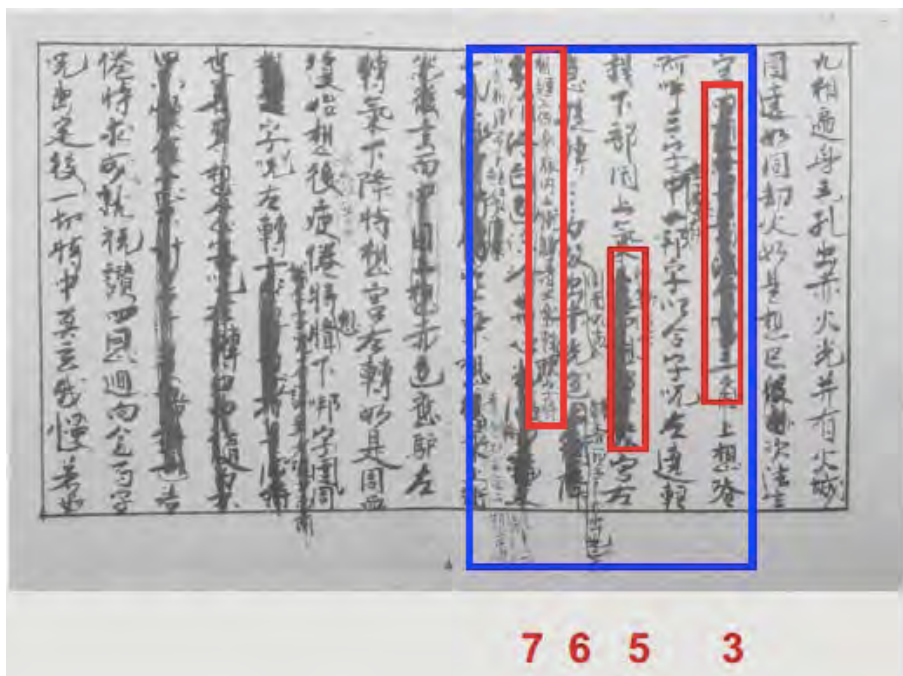


Fig. 1: Text (2) A 19 *Jingang haimu chanding* 金剛亥母禪定 [The Meditation on Vajravārāhī]. Published in: Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998, vol. 5, p. 257 (A 19, fol. 2). The squares and line nos. are added by me.

Ritual Manual for Communal Use: Example of text (1) Stages of Making Feast Offerings to Vajravārāhī

Finally let me briefly turn to ritual manual no. (1) *Stages of Making Feast of Offerings to Vajravārāhī*, which is for a communal practice. It offers a rather detailed description on how to perform a communal gathering led by an accomplished ritual master, done in order to invite the presence of the divinity and provide food offerings to her. And it is here that we can understand the importance of *taste* within the invocation and pleasing process of a divine presence. In the introduction to their book *Exploring the Senses*, Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf differentiate between the public ‘far senses’ of vision and hearing and the ‘nearby senses’ of tasting, smelling and touching.³⁷ Taste is an intimate sense and as such the feeding of a deity functions as a moment of intimate exchange—in our case between the ritual master and Vajravārāhī.

³⁷ Michaels and Wulf 2014: 13.

There is actually much we can say about this ritual manual, though here I shall limit myself to one last important passage regarding the feeding of the deity. Eventually the ritual master identifies *himself* with the divinity (Vajravārāhī's wisdom aspect), becoming Vajravārāhī and in this form accepts the offering for Vajravārāhī. Here our ritual manual reads as follows:

The guru opens the palm of his left hand and places the three-pronged *mudrā* with the right hand on top of it and answers [to the ritual servant]:

"Now this true pure *dharma* of the *tathāgatas* is separate from all stains of greed and liberates one from all attachments.

To this true nature I pay homage." [Recite] trice.

The guru makes the lotus *mudrā* to accept the offering. At that time the ritual servant says: "A [a] la la ho" and the guru responds: "Siddhi ja ho".

[Then the guru] receives these two kinds of food. He uses the ring finger of the left hand to accept the alcohol, and first offers it to the guru [sitting on] his crown. Then he offers it to the guru [sitting at] at his navel *cakra*. Then he offers it to the *ḍākinīs* to taste, who [are sitting] on his tongue.

At that time eat the two kinds of food, visualise the mouth as a fire *maṇḍala* and the two hands as the two fire *puja* spoons, and visualize eating the food as *amṛta* offered to the meditational deity.

What is most striking about this passage is the fact that multiple emanations of the divine presence appear: Vajravārāhī is not simply present in the *maṇḍala* in front of the ritual master (mentioned in the preceding passage); the ritual master himself becomes Vajravārāhī and, more importantly, she sits on his or her tongue as well to taste the offering. Here likes and dislikes, approvals and disapprovals with regard to the offering could be expressed immediately. And when the community of practitioners is invited to follow the example of the guru and to practice likewise, multiple emanations of Vajravārāhī are present—so that the feast offering, in fact, becomes a feast offering of a community of Vajravārāhīs. It is not simply one buddha that is venerated through a food offering; it is a *multitude of female buddhas that are pleased*.

To sum up, what I have tried to show in this case study is how a Tantric Buddhist practitioner is enjoined to *sense* the world around

herself or himself as well as her or his own body. As a multi-sensory experience of a divine presence, with various senses covering different functions from distant contact (the in-sight or view of the deity) to very close exchanges with a divinity (in the case of taste), the senses operate in relation to each other and may express different ways of contact. Such types of prescriptive ritual manuals, as presented here, guide a practitioner to develop an intimate relationship with her/his deity and to stimulate the imagination for further interactions with a divine or transcendental sphere.

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Liberation through sensory encounters in Tibetan Buddhist practice

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Scholars of religion have readily acknowledged for some time the importance of physical, sensory encounters with specialized objects in shaping religious subjectivities and beliefs.¹ Yet scholars of Buddhist traditions have been relatively slow to recognize how Buddhists positively enlist the body and senses in daily approaches to religious practice. Consequently, the stereotype that Buddhist traditions are exclusively focused on the mind and its cultivation, and therefore neglect and even reject rich attention to sensory life and embodied experience continues to circulate.²

This paper is an attempt to bring greater awareness to the roles of the senses in Buddhist traditions by presenting as a limit case a set of popular Tibetan Buddhist sense-based practices systematized by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) in his short text entitled, *An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Samboghakāya Tamer of Beings*, (*Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba bcu gcig gi lag len gsel byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*).³ This text—based on revelations of the visionary master mChog gyur bde chen gling pa (1829–1870) that are still widely practiced today in Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and the rest of the Tibetan Buddhist world—features eleven different modes of sensory and cognitive contact with especially potent objects as the primary point of departure for personal—and collective—transformation.

¹ Compelling examples in the study of Christianity include the classics, Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978) and Peter Brown, *Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Christianity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981); and, more recently, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, Zone Books, 2011).

² For insightful analyses of the influence of this “Protestant” tendency in the history of Buddhist Studies, see Almond 1988 and Trainor 1997.

³ This texts provenance and extant versions will be discussed below.

Analysis of this text will briefly touch on the pedigree of sensory practices in Indian Buddhist traditions and the history of their reception and systematization in Tibet, before presenting how the material and ritual specifications of each technique relates sensory experience to cognition, language, and action to bring about a range of effects. The broader goal of this exercise is to help remedy lingering perceptions of Buddhist traditions as fundamentally world abnegating, and therefore neglectful or dismissive of rich attention to sensory experiences and other physical interactions with sacra. Kong sprul's writing and the revelatory tradition of which it partakes powerfully illustrates that some contemporary Buddhist traditions not only acknowledge the senses as a potent fulcrum for spiritual growth, but sometimes even focus on the senses and performative sensory interactions with specialized objects as the primary medium through which to refine the sensibilities of practitioners and experiencers. This paper further suggests that these practices are best understood in the context of the history and transmission of Buddhist traditions in India, and Tibet. It attempts to illustrate that the practices outlined in this 19th century Tibetan text are neither purely a Tibetan innovation, nor entirely unique to tantric practice, but represent instead the final stage of a centuries-long process of systematizing sensory practices that originated and first became widespread in mainstream Indian Mahāyāna circles, and before.

1. Introduction

It is perhaps a truism that the senses “mediate the relationship between self and society, mind and body, idea and object.”⁴ It thus stands to reason that sensory contact and perception would serve as an explicit focal point in Buddhist contemplative practices and philosophical reflections. Indeed, the strong emphasis that Buddhist traditions have placed on the mind and its transformation as key for spiritual progress has never curtailed the circulation of practices that utilize, or even feature, sensory experiences with powerful objects, alone or in combination, as methods to hasten spiritual growth.⁵ The mind, for that matter, has often been understood by Buddhist theorists as a “sensory organ” in its own right—not in opposition to the other sensory organs, but as an additional faculty that takes the other sensory perceptions as its objects, prior to the introduction of

⁴ Bull, Gilroy, Howes, and Kahn 2006: 6.

⁵ These include not only relics, *stūpas*, statues, icons, and temples, but any other object believed to have been used or in contact with Buddha Śākyamuni and other buddhas, bodhisattvas, disciples, and saints. For a glimpse into the wide range of cult objects venerated in ancient Buddhist India, see Faxian 2002.

interpretive concepts. It has been remarked that the space where percepts and non-conceptual mind meet and the dynamics involved in this encounter is undertheorized in Buddhist philosophical treatises.⁶

Equally undertheorized by Buddhist thinkers is the aporia of how, precisely, given the primacy of mind and the proposed Mahāyāna goal of realizing the sameness of all phenomena in emptiness qua dependent origination, sensory encounters with particularly potent sensory and material objects have emerged at the very core of Buddhist communal formations in India and wherever else Buddhism has spread and taken root. Relics, reliquaries, statues, icons, amulets, and anything else that resembles or was believed to be have been in contact with a past master, buddha, or bodhisattva—in addition to scriptural books, or the diagrams, formulas, and mantras spelled out in them—have all played pivotal roles in the expansion and institutionalization of Buddhist traditions across Asia.⁷

Numerous *sūtras* and *tantras* detail the benefits acquired through seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, or having some other sensory contact with these kinds of objects.⁸ Such beneficial outcomes often run the gamut between healing, protection against natural or manmade calamities, longevity, conception and childbirth, increase of wealth and power, or some other pragmatic effect; through to the prevention of rebirth in the three lower realms as hell denizens, animals, or anguished spirits, or some other mode of karmic purification; all the way up to heightened meditative experience, manifestation of awakened qualities, and liberation from *samsāra* as a whole.

There are multiple ways in which Buddhist scriptural sources, taken as a whole, construe the efficacy of these sensory encounters with powerful objects. This makes the issue of efficacy open to interpretation—and contestation. In some sources, the devotion of the experiencer is the prime mover and the object need not have any intrinsic power whatsoever to become a cult object and, through faith alone, a worthy object of further veneration. We might provisionally term this type of object the “dog’s tooth” variety, after the famous Tibetan story of how an ordinary dog’s tooth, given by a neglectful son

⁶ Dreyfus 1997: 560n14.

⁷ Examples are numerous. Notable studies of the importance of sacred objects in South Asian and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions include Mus 1935, Dallapiccola and Zingel-Avé Lallemand 1980, Tambiah 1984, Schopen 1987, Boucher 1991, Trainor 1997, and Strong 2004.

⁸ Instances of this phenomenon are too numerous to cite. A browse through the many translations being published by 84000: *Translating the Words of the Buddha* (<http://read.84000.co/>) yields several examples.

to his devout old mother under the pretext of being the Buddha's tooth, nonetheless yielded its own actual relics after the mother venerated it with devotion.⁹

On the opposite extreme are other sources, which key the object as so intrinsically powerful that any interaction with it whatsoever, even if utterly unintentional, can bring a range of pragmatic and transcendent effects. We might provisionally refer to this type of object as the "chased pig" variety, after another famous Tibetan narrative, in which a pig is unwittingly chased by a dog around a *stūpa* so potent that "the seed of enlightenment was sown in both of them."¹⁰

Yet other sources—the majority, in fact—are situated somewhere between these ideal-typical poles, or reflect aspects of both. These frame encounters with such objects as potent *conditions* for transformation, which bring variegated effects in tandem with the subjectivities and actions of those who produce and interact with them. These mitigating circumstances are variously explained in terms of the level of realization of the person who created or manifested the object (i.e., whether it was a buddha, or bodhisattva, what level of spiritual realization the bodhisattva had attained, etc.), the previous or subsequent training of the experiencer (i.e., an advanced yogin, or an "ordinary person"), the subjective state in which the object is experienced (i.e., with strong devotion, or not), the subjective qualities of the ritual officiants who prepared the object (i.e., possessing "experience and realization," or not), whether or not the proper ritual protocol was followed in its preparation, and so on.¹¹ In such instances, the intentionality of the beings interacting with the object are a key factor. Scriptural sources, moreover, are often not uniform in their approach. Sometimes a *sūtra* or *tantra* will concede that a sensory encounter can grant all manner of positive effects only to conclude with the deflating caveat: "barring the ripening of previous karma" (Skt. *sthāpayitvā paurāṇaṃ karmavipākam*, Tib. *sngon gyi las kyi rnam par smin pa ma gtogs*).

The kind of substance that perhaps best illustrates the tensions between these approaches in Tibet is "Treasure substance" (*gter rdzas*). In the 11th and 12th centuries, as Tibetans were systematizing Indian Buddhist scriptural traditions to form uniquely Tibetan lineages and institutions, visionary masters, otherwise known as Treasure revealers (*gter ston*), began to unearth revelations with a demonstrably material

⁹ Patrul 2011: 173–174.

¹⁰ Ibid., 188 and 239.

¹¹ For a rich example of how one 16th to 17th century Tibetan master theorized about these mitigating factors, see Gentry 2017: 273–274.

and sensory focus.¹² These “Treasure substances,” as they are called, include a range of potent materials which the rNying ma tradition (and, to a lesser extent, the Bon and bKa’ brgyud traditions) maintains were concealed by the 8th to 9th century Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and others throughout the Tibetan landscape for later destined Treasure revealers to retrieve and implement anew when the time for their peak efficacy is reached.¹³ These items—typically excavated along with Treasure teachings that explain their histories, benefits, and modes of preparation—can include statues, relics, clothing, ritual objects, gems, medicines, and even entire valleys or lands. These substances are also often presented as including the fluids, flesh, bone, hair, nails, clothes, or handiwork of Padmasambhava and other awakened buddhas and bodhisattvas from the past. In this they are presumed to have their own intrinsic powers to impact beings and environments. Human ritual treatment, however, is typically still required to activate, or channel the power of these items toward specific aims. Other objects are not revealed, strictly speaking, but manufactured based on directives decoded from Treasure teachings, using ingredients that are only sometimes construed to possess their own intrinsic powers; the power of such objects tends to be more fundamentally rooted in their subsequent ritual treatment.

Regardless of its source, once the power of these objects is augmented and unleashed by ritual mediation, it is most often expressed in narratives and liturgies in terms of newly acquired properties of animation that confound the senses. Treasure substances and objects are depicted as multiplying, boiling, wafting fragrance, emitting lights, or sounds, flying, producing dreams and visionary encounters with deities, masters, and buddhas, and other outcomes that typically astound and inspire audiences and participants.¹⁴

¹² Although this refers to Treasure substances in particular, and not to the texts that these typically accompany, the rationale of the Treasure tradition as a whole can be characterized in terms of an emphasis on materiality, a distributed sense of agency, and the pronounced presence of political overtones. See Gentry 2017: 46–68.

¹³ This constitutes the general scenario for most Treasures. However, the rNying ma school also includes among its ranks other Treasure concealers, such as Srong btsan sgam po (fl. 7th c.) Vimalamitra (fl. 8th c.), Ye shes mtsho rgyal (fl. 8th and 9th c.), and prince Mu tri bTsan po (fl. 8th and 9th c.), among others. See Gyatso 1993: 98n2. Moreover, Treasures are not just the preserve of the rNying ma school. They also feature among the authoritative teachings of other schools, including Bon (Ibid.). For a detailed traditional account of the rNying ma school’s Treasure tradition, see Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1986.

¹⁴ Gentry 2017: 56–133.

Liturgies are often explicit that such events are telltale signs of the success of ritual performances focused on these items.¹⁵

By the fourteenth century many of these objects came to be categorized according to a four-fold typology, in which the mode of contact or efficacy was used to refer to the objects themselves. We thus encounter objects such as 1) miniature statues, *stūpas*, or other images said to be crafted by the hands of past masters, as well as special *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas, that promise “liberation through seeing;” 2) a range of *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* textual formulas and instruction manuals that promise “liberation through hearing;” 3) instruction manuals, circular diagrams (*yantra*), *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas that prescribe their manufacture into powerful amulets that can confer “liberation through wearing;” 4) especially potent pills made of the relics of past buddhas and masters, and other materials that can grant “liberation through tasting.” Included in one or another of these categories is also a number of other items, such as ritual daggers, hats, vases, water, gems, garments, masks, and so forth, that similarly promise “liberation” to whomever comes into physical, sensory contact with them.¹⁶

The rNying ma school has sometimes promoted the idea that interactions with these kinds of objects are special techniques belonging to their Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) tradition that can grant “buddhahood without meditation” (*ma bsgoms sangs rgyas*). There has also been a pronounced tendency to concentrate these media into a single item, and to distribute their efficacy to other persons, places, or things. It has become commonplace to encounter special objects, instructions, persons, and locations said to have the capacity to liberate through all four modes; these are said to be “endowed with the four modes of liberation” (*grol ba bzhi ldan*). In such instances, liberation through “wearing” and “tasting” are sometimes replaced with liberation through “touching” and “recollecting,” apropos of the type of object involved (i.e., whether it is something that can be “worn,” or “tasted”). Great Perfection literature tends to describe a person endowed with all four liberations—that is, someone with whom any kind of sensory contact brings others spiritual progress—as having the capacity to provide the highest form of beneficial action in the world. Theoretically, this capacity is achievable only by sublime beings who have perfected themselves for the welfare of others.

The fourteenth century was also witness to what may have been the first public critiques among Tibetans of the claim that encounters with

¹⁵ Ibid.: 292–375.

¹⁶ For more details about these categories, along with studies of specific examples, see Gayley 2007; Gentry 2017; and Turpeinen in the present issue.

special objects are so potent that they can bring “liberation.”¹⁷ These criticisms came from prestigious Buddhist hierarchs, who seemed to have seen in such a claim a gross exaggeration of the potency of objects described in scriptural sources, at the expense of the mind and efforts put toward its purification. These early criticisms resurfaced with greater force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, compelling rNying ma exegetes to provide more robust doctrinal justifications for their efficacy.¹⁸

As a testament to the success of these rNying ma rebuttals, persons, places, and things claimed to liberate upon sensory contact became popular throughout Tibetan religious culture, and the kinds of objects purported to possess such powers continued to proliferate. For instance, the monasteries and institutions of other sectarian groups, such as the Sa skya school’s Zhwa lu monastery, among several other examples, gained considerable fame for their possession of relics, reliquaries, texts, or other objects similarly construed as items that could purify immeasurable negative karma and sometimes even bring liberation, simply through sensory contact.¹⁹ We also begin to encounter an expansion of the “four liberations” to a rubric of six modes of liberation (*grol ba drug*), in which “touching” (*reg pa*) and “sensing/smelling” (*tshor ba*), or sometimes “recollecting” (*dran pa*), are added to the previous set of four: seeing, hearing, tasting, and wearing. Prevalent also was an enumeration of eight means of “liberation,” in which “wearing” appears first, followed in turn by liberation through “seeing,” “hearing,” “touching,” “tasting,” “recollecting,” “understanding,” and “sensing.”²⁰ ‘Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas’s 19th century typology of eleven modes of liberation, to which we turn next, seems to be a unique expansion of this rubric to include an even wider range of media through which to connect with particularly powerful objects.

¹⁷ There may have been earlier critiques, but the earliest instances recorded by the famous rNying ma apologist Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624) are a third-person account of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa’s (1357–1419) rejection at sNe gdong rtse of “liberation through wearing” amulets and “liberation through tasting” pills (*Lung rigs ’brug sgra*: 126.5–6), and ‘Bri gung dpal ’dzin’s (c. 14th century) terse dismissal of “liberation through hearing” instructions and “liberation through wearing” amulets in his broadside against the rNying ma school (*Nges don ’brug sgra*: 317.4–319.5).

¹⁸ Gentry 2017: 171–290.

¹⁹ Skal bzang and rGyal po 1987: 34–42. For more on this aspect of Zhwa lu monastery’s institution prestige, see Wood 2012.

²⁰ Lha btsun Nam mkha’ ’jigs med 1975: 176.3–4.

2. 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's 'Eleven Liberations'

Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas's exposition on eleven modes of liberation details eleven different ritual methods, each of which prescribes the construction and/or ritual preparation of a potent sensory or cognitive object that promises to directly or indirectly bring liberation and other benefits to whomever makes contact with it. This text's enumeration of eleven such methods—the most extensive rubric of its kind in Tibet—is certainly not arbitrary. The full title of Kong sprul's writing—*An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Saṃbhogakāya Tamer of Beings, from 'Dispeller of All Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]*²¹—illustrates that it was composed specifically to elucidate these practices as they relate to a cycle of revelations known as *Dispeller of All Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]* (*Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel*), revealed by his associate the Treasure revealer mChog gyur bde chen gling pa sometime between 1858 and 1867.²² Kong sprul's text is therefore included in the various editions of the *mChog gling gter gsar*, the compilation of mChog gyur gling pa's revelations. And although its location in these editions varies slightly, it invariably appears paired with another text authored by Kong sprul²³—*A Chariot for Benefitting Others: The Activity, Initiation, and [the Rite of] the Tie to the Higher Realms of the Saṃbhogakāya Guru, Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*.²⁴ This liturgy centers on a *maṇḍala* of eleven deities:

²¹ *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba gcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*. The bibliographic locations of this text will be outlined just below.

²² Kong sprul, *gTer ston lo rgyus*, 650.5–651.3. For more on the life and revelations of mChog gyur gling pa, see Togyal 1988 and Doctor 2005.

²³ It appears in all extant *mChog gling gter gsar* collections with the following title page: *[Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba gcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*. Its location in the different editions is as follows: *gTer chos/ mChog gyur gling pa*, 32 v., vol. 3 (*Ga*), 27 ff. (New Delhi: Patshang Lama Sonam Gyaltzen, 1975–1980), 577–629; *mChog gling gter gsar*, 39 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 20 ff. (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Pema Tashi, 1982–1986), 253–291; *mChog gling bde chen zhig po gling pa yi zab gter yid bzhin nor bu'i mdzod chen po*, 40 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 22 ff. (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ka-nying Shedrup Ling Monastery, 2004?), 263–305. This presentation and analysis of this text is the result of comparison of these versions, in consultation with the versions located in the various *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* collections (see the following note for their locations). Page and folio numbers of all passages referenced in this article are according to the Ka-nying Shedrup Ling edition (2004?).

²⁴ *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun gsal las/ Bla ma longs sku 'gro 'dul ngan song dong sprugs kyi phrin las dbang bskur gnas lung dang bcas pa gzhan phan shing rta*. Its location in the different editions is as follows: *gTer chos/ mChog gyur gling pa*, 32 v., vol. 3 (*Ga*), 39 ff. (New Delhi: Patshang Lama Sonam Gyaltzen, 1975–1980), 500–576; *mChog gling gter gsar*, 39 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 31 ff. (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Pema Tashi, 1982–1986), 191–

Akṣobhya is the main deity in central position; Vajrasattva is situated on Akṣobhya's crown; and Avalokiteśvara is to Akṣobhya's front. Surrounding them, situated on an eight-petal lotus, are Vairocana in the east; Ratnasambhava-Śākyamuni in the south; Amithābha in the west; Amoghasiddhi in the north; Khasarpaṇi Avalokiteśvara (Sem nyid ngal gso) in the southeast; Amoghapāśa, another form of Avalokiteśvara, in the southwest²⁵; Padmoṣṇīṣa in the northwest; and Vajrasāra in the northeast.

It happens that each of the eleven liberations in *An Astonishing Ocean*, as I shall henceforth call Kong sprul's eleven-fold manual, centers on one or another of these deities as the focal point of its associated liturgical practice. More specifically, each practice involves the visualization and/or artistic rendering of the entire eleven-deity *maṅḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* ('Gro 'dul 'khor ba dong sprugs), but the deity governing each technique of liberation shifts to central position in turn. In this way, Kong sprul's explication of eleven techniques of liberation integrates a diverse range of sensory practices into the liturgical framework centering on this *maṅḍala*.

The purported effect of this liturgy to "churn the depths of *saṃsāra*" illustrates that the goal of these practices is resolutely soteriological in scope—their ultimate aim is nothing short of complete liberation from *saṃsāra*. However, as has been observed with much tantric Buddhist practice,²⁶ *An Astonishing Ocean* does not eschew pragmatic goals, but absorbs and integrates them into an overarching soteriological framework, in which the term "liberation" is clearly intended to index a hierarchy of possible effects: liberation from adverse circumstances in this life, liberation from negative karmic consequences in the next, liberation from rebirth in *saṃsāra*, and possibly others, nestled in between.²⁷

This dynamic is evidently at work even in this text's bibliographic position within Kong sprul's compendium of Treasure teachings known as the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, where the text also appears, in addition to its inclusion in the *mChog gling gter gsar* cycle. *An Astonishing Ocean* is categorized in the different editions of the *Rin chen*

252; *mChog gling bde chen zhig po gling pa yi zab gter yid bzhin nor bu'i mdzod chen po*, 40 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 36 ff. (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ka-nying Shedrup Ling Monastery, 2004?), 191–262.

²⁵ For a discussion of texts found in the Dunhuang caves that feature Amoghapāśa, see van Schaik 2006.

²⁶ Samuel 1993: 27.

²⁷ For more on this adumbration and hierarchical merging of the scope of liberatory effects promised through such sensory encounters, see Gentry 2017: 241–244 and 266–267.

gter mdzod chen mo under the category “sublime activities” (*mchog gi phrin las*). This is a relatively short section, but it heads the wider category of “extensive collection of specific rituals” (*bye brag las kyi tshogs rab 'byams*), which also includes the full range of pragmatically-oriented Treasure liturgies that appear in the sub-section “common activities” (*thun mong gi phrin las*), immediately following “sublime activities.”²⁸ In this way, Kong sprul categorizes *An Astonishing Ocean* in his *Rin chen gter mdzod* collection alongside other texts that detail practices of liberation through sensory encounters with potent objects, framing it and its associated “sublime activities” liturgies as the crowning soteriological variants of sets of material religious practices whose aims are more pragmatic in scope.²⁹ As will be illustrated below, this pattern applies to each of the eleven techniques as well.

Before turning to Kong sprul’s liturgy, it is important to note that the appellation of the *mandāla* and practice cycle to which this liturgy is attached, *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*, indicates that mChog gyur gling pa’s revelation is intimately connected to another much earlier Treasure cycle: *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*'Khor ba dong sprugs*), revealed by the famous 13th century Treasure revealer Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–1270).³⁰ At certain points in Kong sprul’s liturgy he draws directly from Guru Chos dbang’s revelation, the *tantra* of *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*),³¹ thus implicitly acknowledging that mChog gyur gling pa’s similarly-titled revelatory cycle might have drawn inspiration, or perhaps even textual material, from Guru chos dbang’s earlier revelation.³² Analysis of the parallels between these two cycles lies outside the scope of the present paper; I will nonetheless attempt to note instances where Kong sprul makes such connections explicit in his liturgy.

Moving on to the content of Kong sprul’s text itself, after a brief homage and a general explanation of the subject matter, the text outlines its governing structure: eleven sections detailing eleven methods of liberation. They are as follows:

²⁸ *Rin chen gter mdzod* 1976–1980, vol. 67 (Ni) : 303–341; *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* 1997, vol. 42 (Ni): 453–492.

²⁹ For more on Kong sprul’s compilation of the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, see Schwieger 2010. For a catalogue of the *mTshur phu* version of this collection and translations of the colophons of its texts, see Schwieger and Everding 1990–2009.

³⁰ Kong sprul, *gTer ston lo rgyus*, 399.1.

³¹ Gu ru Chos dbang 1976–1980.

³² Robert Mayer’s insightful application of the notions of the tradent and textual modularity to the dynamic of Treasure revelation in Tibet comes to mind in this regard; see Mayer 2015.

1. liberation through seeing a *mudrā*
2. liberation through hearing a mantra
3. liberation through tasting
4. liberation through touching sand
5. liberation through recollecting a *stūpa*
6. liberation through cultivating
7. liberation through drinking from a stream
8. liberation through wearing a *dhāraṇī*
9. liberation through training in *poṣadha*
10. liberation through smelling incense
11. liberation through making offerings³³

Before delving into each of these topics, a few general observations may help orient our foray into this text and the practices it presents. Firstly, not only does the enumeration of eleven liberations correspond with the number of deities in the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*, as explained above—so does its sequence. Reviewing the subject heading of each section as these are elaborated in the body of the text immediately reveals that the order of liberations reflects the order of deities in the *maṇḍala*, such that Akṣobhya features in “liberation through seeing,” Vajrasattva, in “liberation through hearing,” Avalokiteśvara, in “liberation through tasting,” on down the list to Vajrasāra, in “liberation through making offerings.”

Moreover, at a glance it is immediately apparent that this list includes not only modes of liberation through the basic five sensory experiences of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling particularly potent sensory objects. It also includes modes of liberation through the mental operations of recollecting, cultivating, and training. In this it is helpful to recall that the mind is typically construed in Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal contexts drawn from India as a sensory organ in its own right. But the inclusion of cognitive practices here nonetheless elicits questions: How are these mental exercises any different from standard Buddhist meditation practices, which typically emphasize mind and its cultivation in gaining freedom from the fetters of attachment to sensory objects? Why, for that matter, are these packaged alongside the practices of liberation through sensory encounters? And what is the role of sensory encounters with potent objects in these seemingly mind-centric practices?

We can also readily see in this list that there are a few other manners

³³ Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 265.2–4: *phyag rgya mthong grol sngags thos grol/ /myang grol bye ma reg grol/ /mchod rten dran grol zhing sgom grol/ /'babs chu 'thung grol gzungs btags grol/ /gso sbyong bslab grol/ /spos tshor grol/ /mchod sbyin spyad pas grol rnam so/*

of liberation that stipulate sensory experience, but feature modes of sensory contact specific to certain types of objects. For instance, there is liberation through “wearing,” as distinct from touching; liberation through “drinking,” as distinct from tasting; and liberation through “making offerings,” as distinct from any specific sensory medium. In these instances, the premium seems to be placed on the objects themselves, or on the actions by which one interacts with them, rather than on the sensory medium through which they are accessed, or on the mind and its cultivation. What role in these practices, we might wonder, do the senses themselves play in gaining liberation through encountering such objects? And what is the role of the mind and its cultivation, both in these practices, and in those that more centrally feature encounters through the five primary senses?

Immediately after this list, moreover, the would-be ritualist is told that to perform the four practices of liberation through tasting, liberation through seeing, liberation through recollecting, and liberation through wearing requires the liturgical framework of the associated rite of *Sam̄bhogakāya Tamer of Beings* (*Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi cho ga*), which is explained separately.³⁴ What does the embeddedness of these techniques in liturgical performances say more general about the role of human-object interactions in securing their efficacy? To address these and related questions an account of the eleven practices is in order.

2.a. Liberation through seeing

First in the sequence of eleven modes of liberation is “liberation through seeing.” More specifically, the section heading describes this practice as “liberation through seeing the *mudrā* of Akṣobhya.”³⁵ The section opens with instructions to build a *bodhi stūpa*, well-proportioned and of whatever size one can afford, and to place in a portico on its “vase”—its bulbous body—a statue (*sku*) of Akṣobhya, replete with all the iconographic features described in the generation-stage visualization liturgy (Tib. *mngon rtogs*, Skt. *abhisamaya*) of the associated *Sam̄bhogakāya Tamer of Beings*.³⁶ This is followed by instructions to write on its pedestals the *dhāraṇī* of *Las sgrib rnam sbyong*—the Tibetan translation and transliteration of the *Sarvokarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī-nāma-dhāraṇī*³⁷—either once, or as many times as will fit, followed by this petition (*'dod gsol*):

³⁴ Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 265.4–266.1.

³⁵ Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 266.1: *mi 'khrugs pa'i phyag rgya mthong grol*

³⁶ Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–4.

³⁷ *Las kyi sgrib pa thams cad rnam par sbyong ba zhes bya ba'i gzungs* (*Sarvokarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī-nāma-dhāraṇī*), Tōh. 743, 2006–2009.

May all beings who see this supreme receptacle be absolved of their evil deeds, obscurations, faults, and downfalls, have the doorway of rebirth into *saṃsāra* and the lower realms closed off, and be caused to easily attain the state of liberation and unexcelled awakening.³⁸

The procedural explanation then states that it would be most excellent to fill the statue and the *stūpa*, including its life-pillar (*srog shing*) and other architectural features, with as many copies of the *dhāraṇī* and petition as will fit.³⁹ However, it adds, if a three-dimensional *stūpa* cannot be built, it is also permissible to draw the *stūpa*, Akṣobhya image, and *dhāraṇī* and petition on paper.⁴⁰

The practitioner is then to perform unspecified purification, ablution, and consecration rites, before embarking on the main practice that centers on the *stūpa*—the liturgy.⁴¹ Here, astrological specifications figure in; the liturgy is to be performed every day, ideally for four separate sessions a day, only between the first and fifteenth days of the “month of miracles” (*cho 'phrul zla ba*), the first month of the Tibetan year, during which, it is believed, Buddha Śākyamuni performed particularly impactful miracles.⁴²

The liturgy follows the basic pattern of a consecration ritual, drawing specifically from the other associated liturgical text authored by Kong sprul mentioned above, *A Chariot for Benefitting Others*.⁴³ The procedure outlined in this other liturgy calls for the ritualist to visualize (*bsgom*s) him or herself as Avalokiteśvara and, while reciting his six-syllable mantra and invoking Akṣobhya through visualizing the radiation and absorption of light rays, to imagine that Akṣobhya infuses the image of Akṣobhya on the *stūpa* with his awakened presence.

The performance proceeds as follows: one imagines that the *stūpa* and statue first dissolve into emptiness. Out of emptiness emerges a celestial palace, adorned at its center with an eight-petal, multicolor lotus, at the center of which rests an elephant-supported jewel throne, crowned with a lotus and moon seat supporting the syllable *hūṃ*. The syllable then transforms into Buddha Akṣobhya, deep blue in

³⁸ Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 266.2–3: *rten mchog 'di gang gis mthong ba'i sems can thams cad kyi sdig sgrib nyes ltung zhi zhing 'khor ba dang ngan song gi skye sgo chod nas thar pa byang chub bla na med pa'i go 'phang bde blag tu thob par mdzad du gsol*

³⁹ Ibid., 266.3–4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 266.4–5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 266.5.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 266.5–267.1. Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–200.1. For comparison with standard *stūpa* consecration rites performed by Buddhists in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

complexion, holding a vajra, seated cross-legged, and bedecked with silk and jewel ornaments. After inviting the actual Akṣobhya to enter this imagined form, coterminous with the *stūpa*, and sealing his presence there, the ritualist is to perform an elaborate offering and praise.⁴⁴

Then ensues the main part of the liturgy: the ritualist is to recite the *dhāraṇī mantra* of Akṣobhya—the same one written on and enclosed within the *stūpa*—without break, while one-pointedly imagining that light radiates from the heart of oneself, as Avalokiteśvara, invoking the awakened mindstream of Akṣobhya. This causes light to radiate forth from the center of Akṣobhya's forehead, flooding the ten directions. The light purifies the karma and obscurations of all beings throughout the three realms, and invokes the compassion and aspirations of the noble ones. Then all their wisdom, awakened qualities, and blessings dissolve back into his heart, causing him to radiate with increasing intensity. Each session concludes with a brief offering and praise, capped with a petition of the desired aim, confession, long-life supplication, aspirations, and auspicious verses.⁴⁵

Signs of the rite's success are presented next. These include the occurrence during ritual proceedings of unexpected sensory experiences, such as unusual lights, smells, and sounds.⁴⁶ At the conclusion of the fifteen days of continuous practice, observing four sessions a day, the ritualist is to perform an elaborate offering, praise, and long-life ceremony, and to toss grain while reciting the *pratītyasamutpāda mantra* a hundred times.⁴⁷

Once the *stūpa* has been sufficiently prepared, it is to be installed somewhere others can easily see it. If such a receptacle (*rten*), as the text stipulates, "for performing, as extensively as possible, aspirations, and the like," is three-dimensional (*bur ma*), it should be placed in an enclosure (*bzhugs khang*). Whereas if it is drawn (*bris pa*) or printed (*spar ma*), it should be attached to the surface of a board and posted prominently, protected from the elements, at a busy thoroughfare where everyone can see it.⁴⁸ Wherever it is placed, the ritual officiant should politely request that it remain there (*bzhugs su bsol*); once thus consecrated through ritual proceedings and placed in the appropriate location, it is now ready to be treated like an especially venerable person.

⁴⁴ Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–5.

⁴⁵ Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 267.1–4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.5–6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.6–268.2.

The section of “liberation through seeing” concludes by citing its benefits (*phan yon*):

If even just seeing this
 Grants freedom from the abodes of bad migrations,
 What need is there to mention that those with faith and *bodhicitta*
 Will traverse the path of the nobles ones [through seeing it]!⁴⁹

Benefits are thus promised to unfold on two levels, according to two different types of audience. Seeing it ensures freedom from negative rebirths for ordinary beings without spiritual training, but it hastens advanced spiritual refinement for the faithful with the compassionate resolve to awaken all beings. This adumbration of different benefits from sensory encounters with the *stūpa*, depending on the diverse needs and levels of spiritual refinement of those experiencing it, is a pattern that recurs for several of the eleven techniques.

2.b. Liberation through hearing

Although “liberation through hearing” follows “liberation through seeing” in the sequence of eleven methods listed in the table of contents, when we reach this section of the text we are told summarily that in this context liberation through hearing pertains exclusively to “liberation through reading aloud the secret mantra of Vajrasattva, which is according to the manner of recitation and meditation found only in the speech of the Omniscient One mKhyen brtse rin po che.”⁵⁰ This practice in all likelihood refers to *Liberation through Hearing the Secret Mantra of Vajrasattva, from the Dispeller of Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]*, composed by Kong sprul’s associate and teacher, ‘Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse’i dbang po (1820–1892), and included in the *Rin che gter mdzod* collection; in one edition it appears just two texts before *An Awesome Ocean* in the same section.⁵¹ *An Awesome Ocean*

⁴⁹ Ibid., 268.2: ‘di ni mthong ba tsam gyis kyang: ngan song gnas las thar ‘gyur na: dad dang byang ldan pa rnam: ‘phags lam ‘gro bas mos ci dgos:

⁵⁰ Ibid., 268.3: rdo rje sems dpa’i gsang sngags bklaḡs pas grol ba ‘don sgom gyi tshul ni kun gziḡs mkhyen brtse’i rin po che’i gsung rab las ‘byung ba de kho nyid do/

⁵¹ *Bla ma’i thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ rigs bḡḡg rdo rje sems dpa’i gsang sngags thos pas grol ba*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, 111 vol., vol. 67 (Ni) (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), 289–302. Kong sprul, in his “catalogue” to the collection, calls this text *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel gyi rdor sems bklaḡ grol* (79.1). It is thus “liberation through reciting” here, rather than “liberation through hearing,” although these two modalities are obviously interrelated. Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse’i dbang po were both instrumental in the revelation and transmission of mChog gyur gling pa’s extensive revelatory output. For more on the role of the relationship between these three figures in mChog gyur gling pa’s revelations, see Tobgyal 1988. For details about the relationship between these three figures in the

provides nothing else aside from this cursory reference.

However, when perusing mKhyen brtse'i dbang po's liturgy it becomes apparent that this practice embeds Vajrasattva meditation and recitation practice, otherwise a standard part of all tantric preliminary practices,⁵² in the specific setting of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*. In so doing, the Vajrasattva mantra takes on extraordinary powers, well beyond those typically outlined in the standard renditions of the practice. This amplification of effects becomes readily apparent when the liturgy cites Padmasambhava to extol the benefits from hearing it:

From even just hearing the sound,
On the wind, from the direction of the mantra's recitation,
All the negative destinies and the sufferings of *saṃsāra* will be quelled.
Whereas even having a mere moment of faith and confidence in it
Will sow the seed of liberation.⁵³

Once again, as with the practice of liberation through seeing, the effects of hearing the mantra can impact one's suffering in this life, the destinations of one's future lives, and final liberation, depending on the attitude and intentionality of the hearer.

2.c. Liberation through tasting

In the third member in the mandalic sequence we encounter "liberation through tasting," specifically, "liberation through tasting of Karmasattva that churns *saṃsāra* from the depths" (*las kyi sems dpa' 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi myang grol*).⁵⁴ This instruction begins with a general injunction to follow the structural framework of a detailed group accomplishment rite, according to the general procedure, if there is preference for such an elaborate ceremony. Without further ado, the text then proceeds to give instructions for how to prepare the "liberation through tasting" pills when there are only a few practitioners, and few resources at hand.⁵⁵

The material preparations for the rite are stipulated first: ritual

so-called *Ris med* movement of eastern Tibet, see Smith 2001: 235–272; and Gardner 2006.

⁵² For a standard rendition of this practice as performed in tantric preliminary practices, see Patrul 2011: 263–280.

⁵³ 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, *Rigs bdag rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang sngags thos pas grol ba*, 294.5: *sngags bzlas pa'i phyogs rlung gi sgra: thos pas kyang ni ngan song dang: 'khor ba'i sdug bsngal thams cad zhi: dad dang nges shes skad cig tsam: skyes kyang thar pa'i sa bon thebs:*

⁵⁴ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 268.3–4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.4.

officiants are to take as their basis the physical relics (*gdung ring bsrel*) of past buddhas, bodhisattvas, or siddhas, and, primarily, the flesh of one born seven times a Brahmin (*skye bdun gyi sku sha*), which has been revealed in Treasure (*gter byon*) or is otherwise renowned in Tibet.⁵⁶ As a protective medium for these relics, practitioners are to mix them with flour formed from the three medicinal fruits,⁵⁷ the three types of *Drosera peltata* herb (*rtag ngu rigs gsum*),⁵⁸ white and red sandal, saffron, and Himalayan march orchid (*dbang lag*),⁵⁹ and combine this concoction with fine rice flour or barley flour. The mixture is then to be rolled into pills the size of seven white mustard grains, allowed to dry completely, painted red with vermilion, and placed in a vase. The vase is to be decorated with a lid ornament of the five buddha families and a band around its neck.⁶⁰

The text next describes the preparations for the ritual procedure: an earth claiming ritual (*sa chog*) is to be performed if the ritual is taking place where no such ritual has ever been held. Otherwise, just the preliminary practice and the offering of a white oblation will suffice. Whatever the case, the text instructs that as preparation for the ritual, a *maṇḍala* image of the *Tamer of Beings* drawn on fabric should be laid out, or, alternatively, this *maṇḍala* should be arranged using clusters of grain corresponding in number to the number of deities in the *maṇḍala*.⁶¹ Regardless of the *maṇḍala* used for the rite, the pill-filled vase should be placed at its center, a *dhāraṇī* cord (*gzungs thag*) should be fastened to it, and oblations and offerings, corresponding with the activity, should be arranged before it. The ritual officiants should then toss the oblations, erect cairns of the four great protectors around the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 268.5. The practice of consuming the flesh of someone who has been born as a Brahmin for seven consecutive lifetimes is prevalent in a number of Indian Buddhist tantric traditions. The *Hevajatantra* and *Cakrasamvoaratantra* are but two of the influential Indian Buddhist tantric scriptures that describe the positive effects of eating seven-times born Brahmin flesh. It appears that in Tibetan, where Brahmins would have been relatively rare, this criterion was relaxed to someone born for seven consecutive lives as a human being. For more on this substance and its role in Tibet as the primary active ingredient in the concoction of pills of power, see Gentry 2017: 259–290, and 296–316. For a discussion of Brahmin flesh in the context of the *Cakrasamvoaratantra* and its commentarial traditions, see Gray 2005.

⁵⁷ These are otherwise known as the “three fruits” (*bras bu gsum*): yellow myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*), beleric myrobalan (*Terminalia bellerica*), and emblic myrobalan (*Phyllanthus emblica*) (*a ru ra/ ba ru ra/ skyu ru ra*). See dGa’ ba’i rdo rje 2007: 167–168, 140, 116; and Karma chos ’phel 1993: 23–27.

⁵⁸ Karma chos ’phel 1993: 406–410.

⁵⁹ dGa’ ba’i rdo rje 2007: 255; and Karma chos ’phel 1993: 163, have this as an abbreviation for *dbang po lag pa*. dGa’ ba’i rdo rje identifies this as *Gymnadenia orchidis* Lindl.

⁶⁰ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 268.5–269.1.

⁶¹ Ibid., 269.1–2.

perimeter of the ritual precinct, dissolve the corresponding visualization, offer more oblations, and entrust the accomplishment of the activity to oath-bound protectors.⁶²

The main practice comes next. It involves the performance of the liturgy, *Tamer of Beings*, from the *mChog gling gter gsar* revelations, but tailored specifically for the preparation of “liberation through tasting” pills. Much like the procedure for the “liberation through seeing” *stūpa* described above, the ritual entails the well-choreographed performance of imagined cognitive imagery, vocal annunciations, and physical gestures, often featuring transactions with offerings, oblations, and other material objects—all focused on the pills in the vase at the center of the *maṇḍala*. Also similar to the “liberation through seeing” *stūpa*, the visualization entails imaginatively deconstructing the self and the vase, and re-envisioning them as buddhas through the standard tantric process of self-generation and front-generation deity yoga. Here practitioners are beckoned to reconfigure self, other, and environment as a pure land populated with fully awakened buddhas, who dynamically interact through their radiation and absorption of swirling rainbow lights, luminous ambrosia, luminous syllables, and other photic media of exchange. These luminous media of exchange, construed as fluid condensations of awakened presence, are imaginatively channeled into the vase, where they infuse and impregnate the pills inside. The *dhāraṇī* cord, which serves as the material lifeline in this process, is continuously held by the primary ritual officiant; it is also passed on to other participants during breaks to make for an uninterrupted flow of power into the vase.⁶³ The main part of each session has participants chant the following verses, followed by prolonged and constant repetition of the mantra of Avalokiteśvara that concludes them:

Mantra rosary from my heart
 Go through the *vajra* path of the *dhāraṇī* cord.
 Invoke the awakened mindstream of the divine assemble of the *maṇḍala*
 generated in front,
 Especially that of the vase deity.

Light radiates from them all,
 Making offerings to the assembly of gurus, tutelary deities,
 Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and *ḍākinīs* throughout the ten directions,
 Thus invoking their pledge.

All the blessings of their knowledge, love, and power

⁶² Ibid., 269.2–.3.

⁶³ Ibid., 269.3–270.2.

Are concentrated in the form of luminous ambrosia.
 Thus dissolving back, the *maṇḍala* blazes forth with extraordinary
 brilliance.
 Radiating back out, all the karma and afflictions of the three realms are
 purified.

The external environment becomes a pure realm of noble ones.
 The internal inhabitants become the Deity of Compassion, Tamer of
 Beings.⁶⁴
 One enters a state in which all sounds are the self-resounding of mantra
 And all thoughts are an expanse of luminosity.

Through this meditative absorption that churns the depths of *saṃsāra*
 Appearance and existence arise as the ground and awaken as a seal,
 And the elixir of the essence of the five outer and inner elements
 Swirls together into a single indivisible drop.

*om maṇi padme hūm hrīḥ*⁶⁵

Each session is to end with 108 recitations of the *dhāraṇī* of *sdig sgrib kun 'joms*—seemingly derived from Guru Chos dbang's related cycle⁶⁶—along with 21 recitations of the mantra for each of the main and surrounding deities, and the performance of offering, praise, and supplication.⁶⁷ The text stipulates that three or four such sessions are to be demarcated for each day of the ritual, but that the mantra recitation must be uninterrupted, so at least one participant should remain chanting throughout the breaks, even throughout the late night and early morning hours.⁶⁸ After giving a few directives for how to close the final evening sessions, the text states that the sequence should

⁶⁴ i.e., Avalokiteśvara.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 270.2–271.1: *rang gi thugs nas sngags kyi phreng: gzungs thag rdo rje'i lam nas song: mdun bskyed dkyil 'khor lha tshogs dang: khyad par bum lha'i thugs rgyud bskul: de dag kun las 'od 'phros pas: phyogs bcu'i bla ma yi dam dang: sangs rgyas byang sems mkha' 'gro'i tshogs: mchod cing thugs dam rgyud bskul nas: mkhyen brtse nus pa'i byin rlabs kun: 'od zer bdud rtsi'i rnam par bsdus: thim pas gzi byin mchog tu 'bar: slar 'phros khams gsum las nyon sbyangs: phyi snod 'phags pa'i zhing khams la: nang bcud 'gro 'dul thugs rje'i lha: shra brag sngags kyi rang sgra dang: dran rtog 'od gsal dbyings kyi ngang: 'khor ba dong sprugs ting'dzin gyis: snang srid gzhir bzhengs phyag rgyar sad: phyi nang 'byung lnga'i dwangs ma'i bcus: dbyer med thig le gcig tu 'khyil: om ma ni padme hūm hrīḥ:*

⁶⁶ A practice featuring the *dhāraṇī* of *sdig sgrib kun 'joms*, or “destroyer of all negative deeds and obscurations” appears in Guru Chos dbang's revelation, *Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*. See Guru Chos dbang 1976–1980: 282. See also Kong sprul's explanation of this *dhāraṇī* and practice, in *sGrub thabs kun btus*, vol. 13: 287–291.

⁶⁷ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 271.1–.2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 271.2–.3.

be repeated for seven days if there are at least 21 practitioners, or three days if there are only seven practitioners involved.⁶⁹

The conclusion of the rite, which should take place on the morning of the eighth or fourth day, respectively, involves a special series of activities featuring an initiation in which the vase is opened and the pills are distributed to participants and audience members.⁷⁰

The section closes by offering a citation, from an unnamed “tantra”, which describes the many benefits of encountering such a pill:

For any and all beings that have any kind of contact with this—whether they see it, hear of it, touch it, wear it around their neck, smell it, taste it, and so on—the misdeeds and obscurations they have accumulated throughout their lifetimes from time immemorial will be purified like a conch shell polished of stains. The karmic doorway to rebirth in *saṃsāra* and the lower realms will be closed. The seed of the higher realms and liberation will be sown. Moreover, all illness, demonic interference, and unhappiness will be quelled, and all lifespan, merit, and wisdom will expand. It will be a great protection of invincibility against obstructers and obstacles. In short, what need is there to express much else: one should know that the beings in whose stomach this pill falls will uphold the lineage of the noble ones and thus be equal in fortune to Avalokiteśvara.⁷¹

When compared with the *stūpa* that liberates through seeing, and the mantra that liberates through hearing, encountering the pill that liberates through tasting promises a far broader range of benefits. Included are not just closure of the door to bad migrations and generalized spiritual growth, but also the pragmatic goals of health, wealth, happiness, and protection—during this lifetime. Moreover, it is not just tasting the pill that can bring such effects. Any sensory contact with it whatsoever will do.

The concentration in the pill of multiple sensory media of interaction and effects is clarified somewhat by a related source that offers a lengthier version of the very same citation presented above. This citation appears in the “benefits” section of the *sādhana*, *Thugs rje chen po padma gtsug tor gyi myong grol ril bu'i sgrub thabs gzhan phan bdud*

⁶⁹ Ibid., 271.3–4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 271.5–273.1.

⁷¹ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 273.6–274.4: *de nyid sems can gang dang gang gis mthong ngam: thos sam: reg gam: mgur du 'chang ba'an: dri tshor ba'an: khar myang ba sogs 'brel tshad thams cad tsho rabs thog ma med pa nas bsags pa'i sdig sgrub thams cad dung dkar gyi rdul phyis pa bzhin dag par 'gyur ro: 'khor ba dang ngan song du skye ba'i las kyi sgo chod par 'gyur so: mtho ris dang thar pa'i sa bon thebs par 'gyur ro: gzhan yang nad dang: gdon dang: yid mi bde ba thams cad zhi zhing: tsho dang bsod nams ye shes thams cad rgyas par 'gyur ro: bgegs dang bar du gcod pas mi tshugs pa'i srung ba chen por 'gyur ro: mdor na gzhan mang du spros ci dgos te: ril bu gang gi stor song ba'i sems can de 'phags pa'i gdung 'dzin pas spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug dang skal pa mnyam shes par bya'o:*

rtsi, composed by 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po; he names the *Ngan song dong sprugs 'gro ba 'dul ba'i rgyud chen po* as its scriptural source.⁷² The lengthier citation here outlines three registers for the pill concoction's efficacy: 1) the actual (*don*) liberation through tasting ambrosia as the unborn, 2) the semiotic/indexical (*rtags*) level as the elixir of the seven-times born [flesh], and 3) the symbolic/designated/sign (*mtshan ma*) level as the perfectly accomplished pill.⁷³ In this way, this triad of *don*, *rtags*, and *mtshan ma* functions to organize the substance along a spectrum of signification—from the actual level, in which signifier and signified have collapsed in the realization of emptiness; to the indexical level, where the substance is composed of the potent flesh of one who once realized the actual; down to the symbolic level, in which pills are produced from traces of the former substance, along with other materials, and their power is augmented, often to the point of animation, through intensive group ritual action. mKhyen brtse'i dbang po prefaces this citation with a telling explanatory remark guiding readers to apply this passage from the *Ngan song dong sprugs 'gro ba 'dul ba'i rgyud chen po* to the other liberation through senses objects:

What is illustrated through the initiation into such a liberation through tasting ambrosia is also how to acquire vast benefit from things that liberate all beings through the four channels of seeing, hearing, recollecting, and touching.⁷⁴

Similar to the levels of “liberation” witnessed above—liberation from negative circumstances in this life, from bad future rebirths in the next life, and from *samsāra* as a whole, depending on the qualities of experiencers—this adumbration of different dimensions of liberation through tasting pills (and, for that matter, other objects that claim to confer liberation through sensory experiences), helps open the way to acknowledge the powers of special objects, while also accommodating them to the ultimate goal of non-dual wisdom and to the requisite role of subsequent ritual treatment in their preparation and use. Not only are certain things like relic pills intrinsically powerful, the very stuff of non-dual wisdom, with real pragmatic effects in the world, they are also symbols for that wisdom and indices to those who once realized it or are instrumental in its ritual treatment and proliferation.

⁷² 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po 1975–1980: 58.4–59.4. The passage cited in *An Astonishing Ocean* appears nearly verbatim in this text on 58.6–59.4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 58.4–5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.3: *de lta bu'i myong grol bdud rtsi'i dbang bskur bas mtshon mthong thod dran reg gis 'gro ba thams cad grol ba bzhi ldan gyi phan yon rlabs po che 'thob pa'i tshul...*

2.d. Liberation through touching

Next in the series of liberations comes “liberation through touching,” specifically, “liberation through touching the sand of Vairocana that purifies the lower realms” (*rnam snang ngan song sbyong ba'i bye ma reg grol*).⁷⁵ Following the pattern observed thus far, this section begins by stipulating the material specifications of the substance: the ritual officiant is to procure from the bank of a great river sand that is pure, in that no human or dog has trampled upon it. The ritual officiant is to then roast it a little, douse it with fragrant substances like saffron water and the like, mix it with white mustard seed, and place the concoction in a vessel. Then the ritual officiant should place a vase containing the twenty-five substances⁷⁶ on a tray, on top of a clean platform; this becomes the focal point of the subsequent liturgy.

The liturgy can be performed by a group of several practitioners, in which case it should only be done for only a day, or by a single individual, in which case it should be performed until the requisite mantras are recited.⁷⁷ Whatever the case, participants are to observe ritual purity throughout the proceedings by refraining from meat, alcohol, and other polluting substances.⁷⁸ After their preliminary performance of refuge, *bodhicitta*, and self-generation deity yoga visualization, practitioners proceed to the main section of the practice.⁷⁹ The main part entails, once again, the highly choreographed performance of imaginative visualization exercises, liturgical chanting and mantra recitation, and gestures, all with the vase concoction as the focal point. Here one first imagines that the vase transforms into a jewel vase, with Vairocana at its center, surrounded by the ten other

⁷⁵ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 274.4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.5: *bum pa nyer lnga'i rdzas ldan. Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* (2002: 1398–1399) lists the 25 substances under the heading “25 vase substances” (*bum rdzas nyer lnga*) as follows: The five precious substances (*rin po che lnga*) of 1) gold (*gser*), 2) silver (*dngrul*), 3) coral (*byu ru*), 4) pearl (*mu tig*), and 5) copper (*zangs*); the five medicines (*smam lnga*) of 6) Himalayan march orchid (*dbang lag*; *Gymnadenia crassinervis*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 163), 7) raspberry (*kantākāri*: *kaṇḍakari*, *Rubus idaeopsisfocke*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 104), 8) heart-leaved moonseed (*sle tres*, corrected from *sle khres*; *Tinospora cordifolia*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 103), 9) bamboo manna/silica (*cu gang*), and 10) sweet flag (*shu dag dkar po*; *shu* is corrected from *sha*; *Acorus gramineus*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 157); the five fragrances (*dri lnga*) of 11) camphor (*ga bur*), 12) musk (*gla rtsi*), 13) nutmeg (*dza ti*), 14) saffron (*gur gum*), and 15) sandal (*tsandan*); the five grains (*'bru lnga*) of 16) barley (*nas*), 17) wheat (*gro*), 18) sesame (*til*), 19) pulse (*sran ma*), and 20) rice (*'bras*); and the five essences of 21) salt (*lan tshwa*), 22) sesame oil (*til mar*), 23) butter (*mar*), 24) raw sugar (*bu ran*), and honey (*sbrang rtsi*).

⁷⁷ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 276.1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.5–.6

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.6.

deities of the *Churning the Depths of the Lower Reams* (*Ngan song dong sprugs*) *maṇḍala*.⁸⁰ While then chanting the liturgy and mantra, one imagines that light radiates from Vairocana's forehead, purifies the evil deeds and obscurations of the six classes of beings, and absorbs back into him, conveying the compassion of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. Vairocana's body then issues a stream of ambrosia, which fills the vase and overflows from its spout. Practitioners expressly imagine that this ambrosial flow dissolves into the material substance in the physical vase, which thus becomes endowed with the potency (*nus pa*)—indivisible from the light that issues from the buddhas and bodhisattvas—to quell all karma, afflictions, evil deeds, obscurations, and suffering.⁸¹ The "mantra for purifying the lower realms" (*ngan song sbyong ba'i sngags*) is to be recited one hundred thousand times, or however many times is possible, along with the mantras of the central deity and each deity in the entourage.⁸² At the conclusion of the rite, Vairocana and the other deities are imagined to dissolve into light and merge with the ambrosia in the vase. The contents of the vase are then poured onto the sand, mixed in, and the concoction is left out to dry.⁸³

In keeping with the pattern observed thus far, this section ends with a citation, from an unnamed source, that spells out how this sand is to be used and the benefits of interacting with it:

By hurling it, taking as a focal point a living being, or the corpse, bones, a piece of fabric, hair, nails, and so forth of a deceased being, all their evil deeds and obscurations will be pacified. Even by tossing it in the wind, in the direction from where the wind is blowing, all beings touched by it will have their obscurations purified and gain the fortune to reach awakening. Even by tossing it into a charnel ground, the evil deeds, obscurations, and bad migrations of the deceased left there will be purified. This amazing [technique] is easy to do, with little hardship.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., 274.6–275.2. *Churning the Depths of the Lower Reams* (*Ngan song dong sprugs*) seems to be used interchangeably throughout this liturgy with *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*, or simply *Tamer of Beings*, the name of the governing *maṇḍala* introduced earlier.

⁸¹ Ibid., 275.2–.4.

⁸² Ibid., 275.4–.6.

⁸³ Ibid., 275.6–276.1.

⁸⁴ Ibid.,: 276.1–.3: 'di ni tshé dang ldan pa'am: shi ba'i ro dang rus pa dang: gos dum skra sen sogs kyang rung: de la gmigs pa'i rten byas nas: brabs pas sdig sgrib thams cad zhi: rdzi phyogs rlung la bskur bas kyang: de yis reg pa'i skyé 'gro kun: sgrib dag byang chub skal ldan 'gyur: dur khrod chen por gtor bas kyang: de la bzhas pa'i tshé 'das kyi: sdig sgrib ngan song sbyong bar byed: bya sla tshégs chung ngo mtshar che:

Perhaps most notable in this passage is that the intentionality of the beings effected seems to play absolutely no role in the efficacy of the sand; contact alone will suffice. Moreover, the sand brings benefits to living and dead alike, through even the most tenuous of physical links. However, Kong sprul somewhat mitigates this strong claim in the passage that immediately follows this citation by placing explicit emphasis on the intentionality of the ritual specialist who prepares the sand. After acknowledging that this technique is certainly suitable to implement, since it is often taught in the *caryā tantras*, Kong sprul adds that the benefit of the technique is uncertain if ritualists do not follow the procedure properly, and instead of being sufficiently focused on the meditation, only casually blow on the sand with a few mantra recitations, and neglect the proper conduct of abstention from alcohol, meat, and the other observations of ritual purity.⁸⁵ It seems, then, that with sand that liberates through contact the role of intentionality shifts to that of the ritual specialist. Properly prepared, the sand can positively impact all beings, regardless of whether they are living, or dead. But this depends entirely on the stability and knowledge of the master who prepares it.

2.e. Liberation through recollecting

We shift our attention now to the first item in the list of eleven techniques that is not framed directly in terms of a sensory encounter: “liberation through recollecting a *stūpa* of Ratnasambhava Śākyamuni” (*rin 'byung śāk thub kyi mchod rten dran grol ba*).⁸⁶ Although this technique involves the cognitive operation of recollection, rather than an explicitly sensory encounter, it nonetheless requires the construction of a potent object—a *stūpa*—and is thus somewhat similar to the technique of liberation through seeing a *stūpa* discussed above. Here, however, it is “bringing the *stūpa* to mind” in an act of recollecting a previous visual encounter that ensures efficacy, rather than seeing it directly.

The material specifications for this *stūpa* stipulate that it be constructed at a busy thoroughfare, charnel ground, or anywhere else a lot of people circulate and gather.⁸⁷ After performing an earth claiming ritual of suitable elaboration, the requisite building materials of earth and stone are to be blessed with *dhāraṇī mantra* and fashioned into a *bodhi stūpa*.⁸⁸ On the stone surface of the *stūpa*'s bulbous center,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 276.3–.5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 276.5.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 276.5.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 276.5–.6.

the “vase,” is to be etched the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*, before the entire structure is painted and sealed with varnish.⁸⁹ Similar to standard *stūpa* consecration procedure, the life-pillar of the *stūpa* is to be filled with the mantras of Vajrasattva and the *Pratītyasamutpāda hṛdaya* (*rten snying*),⁹⁰ and fixed in place. The rest of the vase-shaped center is likewise to be filled, but with the two *dhāraṇī* mantras “mentioned previously,” presumably meaning those that figure in the liberation through seeing *stūpa*, as well as with the *four groups of great dhāraṇī* (*gzungs chen sde bzhi*).⁹¹ A Buddha relic, together with the circular diagram of *Sems nyid ngal gso*, which features later in the liturgy, in the “liberation through wearing” technique, are also to be interred once they are scented with perfume, wrapped in silk, and placed inside a jewel relic box or a clay casket to protect them from moisture.⁹² The petition which was attached to the main mantra in the preparation of the *stūpa* that liberates through seeing is also to be used here as an addendum to the interred mantras.⁹³

Once the *stūpa* has been constructed to specification it becomes the focal point of ritual action. After performing ablution, purification, and consecration rites, according to the general procedure, the ritual officiant is beckoned to don clean clothes, perform the restoration and purification of lapsed vows (Tib. *gso sbyong*, Skt. *poṣadha*), and arrange offerings before the *stūpa*.⁹⁴ Then comes the liturgy proper, which follows the same pattern outlined above with the other liberations: the ritual specialist is to perform a series of coordinated cognitive, vocal, and physical operations, with the *stūpa*, and its life-pillar in particular, as the explicit focal point. Following the same pattern, the buddhas of the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala* radiate and absorb light that merges them with the *stūpa*'s life-pillar and imbues it with their abiding presence. Here, however, Buddha Śākyamuni replaces Akṣobhya as the central buddha, and the liturgical visualization culminates by imagining that “for whomever recollects this [*stūpa*], the brilliance of the wisdom of liberation will blaze forth.”⁹⁵ Another point of distinction is that the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 276.6.

⁹⁰ *rTen cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i sning po* (*Pratītyasamutpādahṛdaya*), Tōh. 521/981.

⁹¹ Ibid., 276.6–277.1. The *gzungs chen sde bzhi* refers to a group of four *dhāraṇīs* that figure prominently as “filling” for reliquaries and statues. They include *gTsug tor rnam rgyal* (Tōh. 597/984), *gTsug tor dri med* (Tōh. 599/983) *gSang ba ring bsrel* (Tōh. 507/883) and *Byang chub rgyan 'bum* (Tōh. 508). These four are more typically part of the rubric *gzungs chen sde lnga*, which also includes the *Pratītyasamutpāda hṛdaya* (*rTen 'brel snying po*). For more on standard *stūpa* consecration rituals in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

⁹² *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 277.2–.3.

⁹³ Ibid., 277.2.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 277.3.–.5.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 278.2–.5: *gang gis dran pas grol ba yi: ye shes gzi byin 'bar bar gyur:*

mantras to be recited are those of Vajrasattva and the *Pratītyasamutpāḍpa hr̥daya*. Per the usual protocol, the ritual concludes with offering, praise, prayers, and further recitations. But added to this is the recollection of the hundred qualities of the Buddha, the recollection of the other Three Jewels, and the recitation of the *Heart Sūtra*, sealed with the practice of emptiness.⁹⁶ Three or four such sessions a day are to be demarcated, and the ritual as a whole is to conclude once the requisite number of mantra recitations or days is complete; most importantly, the rite's conclusion should coincide with the day of the full moon.⁹⁷

The benefits of this technique are then outlined with a concluding verse citation:

If through just bringing this receptacle to mind
 Evil deeds and suffering are pacified,
 And lifespan, merit, and well-being expand,
 Then how could one describe the benefit

From prostrating, making offerings, and circumambulating it?
 Therefore, the devout
 Should build a reliquary at a major thoroughfare, a crossroads, and the
 like,
 And do this (i.e., prostrate, make offerings...)—
 There will be unceasing welfare for beings.⁹⁸

In keeping with the dynamics observed thus far, this citation implies that the positive effects of encountering this *stūpa* and recollecting it range from longevity, wealth, and fortune in this life, to purification of suffering and negative karma in the next, and perhaps also the loftier goal of spiritual progress as well. Here the *stūpa*'s "mere recollection" is sufficient to bring about mundane effects, but the benefits from taking this recollection a step further and physically revering the *stūpa* in person, presumably as an expression of inward devotion, amplifies these effects into loftier, "ineffable" spheres.

2.f. Liberation through cultivating

Next comes the technique among the eleven liberations that seems most explicitly tied to the development of mental states, rather than to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 279.4–5.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 279.6.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 279.6–280.1: *rten 'di yid la byas tsam gyis: sdig dang sdug bsn gal zhi ba dang: tshe bsod legs tshogs 'phel 'gyur na: phyag mchod bskor ba bgyis pa yi: phan yon brjod kyis ga la langs: de phyir mos par ldan rnams kyis: lam srang bzhi mdo la sogs su: mchod rten bzhengs na tshul 'di bya: 'gro don rgyun mi 'chad pa 'byung:*

the engagement with sensory objects. “Cultivating,” here, renders the Tibetan term *sgom*, which is perhaps more commonly translated into English as “meditation.” Here, however, rather than signal the cultivation of freedom from sensory experiences and objects, the term refers specifically to cultivating, meditating on, or assimilating one’s mind to a particularly potent object of reflection: Amitābha’s pure land of Sukhāvātī. The section heading might then be sensibly rendered as “liberation through cultivating preparation for Amitābha’s pureland” (*snang ba mtha’ yas kyi zhing sbyong sgom grol*).⁹⁹

The material specifications for this technique are relatively simple, and, strictly speaking, not required to ensure its complete efficacy. The text stipulates that practitioners arrange in front of them, on the fifteenth day of the month, the holy day of Amitābha, the receptacle of a painting, statue, or the like depicting the pure land of Sukhāvātī.¹⁰⁰ It also calls for them to arrange offerings in front of it according to their means. However, the text is quick to acknowledge, the material support is not strictly necessary; visualization of the pure land suffices to ensure efficacy.¹⁰¹

The liturgy for this technique is also quite basic: after performing the prerequisites of refuge, *bodhicitta*, the four immeasurables, and meditation on emptiness, practitioners are beckoned to imagine that out of emptiness emerges the pure land of Sukhāvātī, precisely as described in *sūtras*, and that the practitioner has transformed into Avalokiteśvara, situated in front of Amitābha.¹⁰² Practitioners are then to perform prostrations, offerings, and prayers before Amitābha, and during session breaks, they are to gather the causes for rebirth in the pure land through bringing Sukhāvātī to mind as frequently as possible. As a daily practice, practitioners are also to visualize that light radiates from their own hearts, invoking the awakened mindstreams of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, who in turn radiate the light of their compassion back to purify their own and all other beings’ obscurations, thus making practitioners suitable vessels, replete with the requisite causes and conditions to be reborn in the pure land of Sukhāvātī. As part of this visualization exercise, practitioners are required to also recite Amitābha’s mantra as many times as possible, along with the “*dhāraṇī* of recollection,” and, as the main part of the practice, to focus one-pointedly and with fierce devotion on the layout of the pure land, precisely as described in *sūtras*. All virtuous actions, moreover, are to be dedicated to rebirth there, and earnest aspirations

⁹⁹ Ibid., 280.2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 280.2–3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 280.3.

¹⁰² Ibid., 280.6–281.

are to be made in kind. This section concludes by instructing to cultivate this vision regularly before sleep at night, and by promising that if one cultivates this vision without interruption, at death, by the power of the buddhas (*sangs rgyas mthu*), their obscurations will be purified and they will surely be reborn in the pure land of Sukhāvati.

In this technique we therefore have a standard practice of recollecting the Buddha, yoked to visualization of Buddha Amitābha in his pure land of Sukhāvati, with the generalized Mahāyāna goal of achieving rebirth there. The inclusion of this practice among these eleven techniques underscores the continuities between Tibetan tantric Treasure practices and the pure land-related practices of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹⁰³

2.g. Liberation through drinking

The next technique in the list of eleven returns us squarely to the domain of the senses, but instead of operate through a particular sensory medium, this technique promises liberation by way of ingestion, specifically, “liberation through drinking from the stream of Amoghasiddhi Bhaiṣajyaguru (*don grub sman gyi bla ma'i 'babs chu 'thung grol*).¹⁰⁴

The material specifications for this technique are as follows: the ritual officiant is instructed to etch on the surface of a flat, smooth, hard stone the form of the Medicine Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru, and to etch on its back the associated *dhāraṇī mantra*.¹⁰⁵ Then it is to be painted, sealed with veneer, and serve as the focal point of rites of purification, ablution, and consecration, before its eyes are opened and it is invested with power (*mnga' dbul*).¹⁰⁶ The text states that it would be most excellent if a spring flowing from a pure and pleasant place, which is sure to flow into the communal drinking water, could be used. But even without such, the ritual officiant is instructed to locate the fount of a stream used by all the [local] people and cattle, fashion a small stone structure there, and “request” the etched stone to “stably remain” (*brtan por bzhugs su gsol*), as though it were a venerable person, such that its bottom is brought into contact with the water source (*chu*

¹⁰³ For discussions of different orientations with regard to “buddha recollection” practice (*buddhānusmṛti*) in Indian Buddhist traditions, including analysis of connections to pure land practice, visualization practice, and the development of Mahāyāna scriptures and doctrinal notions—the confluence of which appears to have significantly informed the practice of liberation through recollecting presented here—see Harrison 1978, 1992, and 2003.

¹⁰⁴ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 284.6–285.1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.1–2.

dang thug par byas).¹⁰⁷ Next, offerings are to be arranged in front of it. And yellow myrobalan (*a ru ra*) is to be gathered, pulverized into small pieces, and placed close at hand.¹⁰⁸

The liturgy entails the preliminaries of self-generation, along with recitation, once again, according to the ritual manual of *Tamer of Beings* (*'gro 'dul las byang*).¹⁰⁹ For the main part of the liturgy, practitioners are to perform the elaborate invitation, installment, dissolution, consecration, and offerings and praises, while observing the front-generation visualization of Amoghasiddhi Bhaiṣajyaguru. Practitioners are then to recite the *dhāraṇī* of Bhaiṣajyaguru in sets of 1,000, thereby incanting the yellow myrobalan.¹¹⁰ At the end, they are to “open the medicine” (*sman phye*) and “toss it into the mouth” (*zhal du 'thor*) of the stream, while supplicating Bhaiṣajyaguru to purify all the beings it touches of all temporary illnesses of elemental imbalances, and ultimate illnesses of the three poisons, karma, obstructions, evil deeds, and suffering.¹¹¹ The text instructs practitioners to repeat the ritual three times, recite the supplication 108 times, and then recite and visualize as follows:

Imagine that the stream of wisdom compassion
That ceaselessly flows
From the alms bowl of ambrosia in his (i.e., Bhaiṣajyaguru's) hands
Is mingled indivisibly with the stream of water,
Such that everyone who douses themselves, drinks, or cleanses
themselves with it
Will be cured of illness, demonic interference, evil deeds, and
obscurations.¹¹²

The liturgy concludes with offering, praise, confession, long-life prayers, aspirations, and auspicious verses.

The benefits are then outlined in a single verse citation:

For as long as this buddha image
And the stream of water remain,
Whoever partakes of this stream of water

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 285.2–.3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 285.3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 285.4–286.1.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 286.1–.4.

¹¹² Ibid., 286.5–.6: *phyag gi bdud rtsi'i lhung bzed las: ye shes thugs rje'i chu rgyun ni: rgyun chad med par byung ba nyid: chu bo'i rgyun dang dbyer med 'dres: gang gis 'thor 'thung khru byed kun: nad gdon sdig sgrib zhi bar bsam:*

Shall be cured of illnesses, demonic interferences, evil deeds, and obstructions.¹¹³

The healing properties of water, now merged with Bhaiṣajyaguru's medicinal ambrosia, is a point of emphasis in this technique. Not only is the curing of illness an explicit effect of interaction with this water, but even the more long-term aims of purifying evil deeds and obscurations are framed in terms of healing. The empowerment of the stream, moreover, is clearly intended to positively impact all who drink of its waters, or have any other contact with it. Here, the intentionality of the consumer, or his or her level of spiritual development, is not mentioned as a factor impacting the water's efficacy. In this the technique of liberation through drinking appears to borrow from the discourse of Tibetan medicine to present a case in which medicinal substance is imbued with its own intrinsic power to heal, on several registers, regardless of whether or not consumers are aware of the water's healing properties. But "liberation" here is circumscribed to freedom from illness, negative karma, and obscurations; ultimate liberation from *samsāra* is not even hinted at as a possible effect.

2.h. Liberation through wearing

The next item in our list of eleven liberations is a technique for granting "liberation through wearing," specifically, as the section heading tells us, "liberation through wearing of Ārya Sems nyid ngal gso" (*'phags pa sems nyid ngal gso'i btags grol*); this refers specifically to wearing as an amulet a circular diagram¹¹⁴ connected with a form of Avalokiteśvara otherwise known as Khasarpaṇi.¹¹⁵

The basic material specifications for making this item require that it be prepared on an auspicious day during the waxing period of a lunar month; that someone with pure *samaya* serve as the writer (*'bri mkhan*); that the writing surface (*'bri gzhi*) be made of silk, cloth, paper, or

¹¹³ Ibid., 287.1–2: *sangs rgyas sku dang chu bo'i rgyun: ji srid gnas kyi bar nyid du: chu bo'i rgyun der sus spyod pa: nad gdon sdig sgrib zhi bar 'gyur*:

¹¹⁴ The Tibetan term here, *tsa kra*, transliterates the Sanskrit word *cakra* ("circle," or "wheel"). In this context it can refer also to *yantra* and *maṇḍala* to broadly denote any magical circular diagram incorporating mantra, imagery, and special substances that is worn to elicit a wide range of pragmatic and soteriological effects. For a catalogue of these items as they are used and worn by Tibetans to address pragmatic concerns, including reproductions of their diagrams and speech formulas, see Skorupski 1983. For more on such "circles" and their historical relationships with *yantra* and *maṇḍala* in the broader Indian context, see Bühnemann 2003.

¹¹⁵ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 287.2.

whatever one can muster, smeared with liberation through tasting *samaya* substance (*myang grol dam rdzas*); and that the ink (*'bri rdzas*) be gold and silver, or vermillion/blood and ilk, mixed with perfume and molten gem.¹¹⁶

The remaining material specifications are three-fold, based on whether the diagram will be highly elaborate, of middling elaboration, or basic. To make the more elaborate version an outline of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings* should be drawn to specification, with four gates, porticoes, courtyard, surrounding precinct, and the rest. And in the place of each deity should be written in a circle the *dhāraṇī* mantra of each, along with its addendum. The petition (*'dod gsol*) and auspicious verses should then be written in the precinct outside that. The manner of arranging the stone fence and fire mountains behind it is shared with the version of middling elaboration.¹¹⁷

To prepare the version of middling elaboration, six layers of concentric circles should be drawn, and at their center, the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara, and the long *dhāraṇī* of Akṣobhya should be written.¹¹⁸ Surrounding them, in the form of a garland, should be written the mantra of Karmasattva, followed by this addendum in Tibetan:

Through the blessing of this great *vidyā*, may everyone who sees, hears, recalls, or touches this, and, in particular, all who wear it be pacified of all evil deeds and obscurations of body, speech, and mind, along with their propensities, and may all their lifespan, merit, and wisdom expand!¹¹⁹

Behind it should be drawn an eight-petal lotus, marked with the *dhāraṇīs* and essence mantras of Sarvavid in the east, Śākyamuni in the south, Amitābha in the west, Bhaiṣajyaguru in the north, 'Khor ba dong sprugs in the southeast, Amoghapāśa in the southwest, Padmoṣṇīṣa in the northwest, and Vajrasāra in the northeast.¹²⁰ Behind that should be drawn a four-petal lotus, marked with the essence mantras of Vajrapāṇi in the east, sMre brtsegs in the south, Vajravidhāraṇa in the west, and Amṛtakuṇḍali in the north.¹²¹ The petition cited just above should be written after each mantra. With the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 287.3–4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 287.4–5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 287.5–6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 288.1–3: *rig pa chen po 'di'i byin rlabs kyis mthong thos dran reg thams cad dang: khyad par 'chang ba po'i lus ngag yid gsum gyi sdiḡ sgrib bag chags dang bcas pa thams cad zhi ba dang: tshe dang bsod nams ye shes thams cad rgyas par gyur cig:*

¹²⁰ Ibid., 288.3–4.

¹²¹ Ibid., 288.4–5.

exception of the central mantras, they should all be written with the tops of the letters facing out.¹²²

Making the simple version requires that one draw the same concentric circles outlined above, but write at their center the seed-syllables *hūm hūm hrīḥ* stacked atop one another; draw an eight-petal lotus, marked with *hūm* on each petal in the cardinal directions, and *hrī* on each petal in the intermediate directions; and write behind it the seven-syllable mantra of *Tamer of Beings*, the four-syllable essence mantra of Karmasattva, the Sanskrit syllabary, the *Pratītyasamutpāda hr̥daya*, and the prose Tibetan addendum, all surrounded by a stone enclosure and fire-mountains.¹²³

Once the diagram has been drawn to specification, its ritual treatment begins with an ablution and consecration rite done “according to common procedure” (*spyi mthun*).¹²⁴ The diagram is then to be placed at the center of a raised platform, ensuring that the front and back are not mixed up, with lavish offerings and oblations arranged in front of it.

The liturgy once again follows the typical pattern witnessed thus far—visualizations, mantra recitations, and gestures are performed in tandem—this time centering on the diagram and its imaginative construal as the Khasarpaṇi form of Avalokiteśvara at the center of the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. The goal is to invoke the awakened wisdom of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the ten directions, such that their wisdom, now spurred to action, assumes the forms of colorful luminous deity images, mantras, and hand implements, which merge indivisibly with the diagram, and thereby enliven the circular diagram with their awakened presence.¹²⁵ The main part of the liturgy session entails maintaining this visualization one-pointedly while reciting numerous times the various mantras written on the diagram. At the end of the session, the ritual master is to recite seven or three times this supplication:

om

Bhagavān, whose nature is compassion,
Deities of the *maṇḍala* of *Churner of the Depths of the Lower Realms*—
Please consider me!

To enact the benefit of beings as far as space pervades—
For myself and all infinite beings—

¹²² Ibid., 288.5.

¹²³ Ibid., 288.6–289.2.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 289.2.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 289.3–290.1.

I beg you, Lord, to reside firmly in this receptacle,
And pacify the evil deeds, obscurations and suffering,

Expand the lifespan, merit, and wealth,
Develop the wisdom,
And swiftly establish on the level of buddhahood,
Anyone, who with devotion wears,
Sees, hears, recalls, or touches
The supreme *maṇḍala* of the great *vidyā*.¹²⁶

The rite concludes with the burning of incense, the playing of music,
and the chanting of the following aspiration:

May all who wear, or who see, hear, recollect, or touch
The great *maṇḍala*, which is *mantra* in form,
For the divine assembly, which is wisdom in essence,
Generated, accordingly, in the circle
Gain the ability to be established in awakening!¹²⁷

Once the liturgy is over, the text outlines specifications for its use. It instructs to fold the circle without damaging the center and wrap it in five-color cords, put this inside a covering or an amulet box so that it does not get damaged, and wear it like a usual “liberation through wearing,” that is, close around the neck or arm pit so that it never gets cold.¹²⁸

The benefits of wearing this diagram as an amulet are then outlined with the following citation:

It will pacify evil deeds and obscurations, increase lifespan and merit,
And expand stainless wisdom
Even for those who have committed the deeds of immediate retribution,
Let along for Dharma practitioners (*chos dang ldan pa*).

Beings who are alive
Will be free from bad migrations and reach the heavens.
Burn it with a corpse at death
And the deceased will be cared for by Ārya [Avalokiteśvara] in the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 290.3–6: *oin: thugs rje'i bdag nyid bcom ldan 'das: ngan song dong sprugs dkyil 'khorlha: bdag la dgongs par mdzad du gsol: bdag dang mtha' yas sems can la: mkha khyab 'gro 'don mdzad pa'i slad: rten 'dir mgon po rtag bzhugs nas: rig pa chen po'i dkyil 'khor mchog: gang gis dad pa'i 'chang ba dang: mthong thod dran reg thams cad kyang: sdig sgrib sdug bsngal zhi ba dang: tshe bsod 'byor pa 'phel ba dang: ye shes rgyas par mdzad nas kyang: myur du sangs rgyas sar 'god gsol:*

¹²⁷ Ibid., 291.1–2: *'khor lor ji ltar bskyed pa yi: ngo bo ye shes lha tshogs la: rnam pa sngags kyi dkyil 'khor che: 'chang dang mthong thos dran reg kun: byang chub dgod pa'i nus ldan gyur:*

¹²⁸ Ibid., 291.4–5.

intermediate state.

The signs of this [happening] are the appearance of rainbow lights, bones, and relics [at cremation].¹²⁹

While much can be said about this practice of amulet production and the range of effects in store for those who interact with it, three general features stand out: 1) the diagram amulet brings positive effects no matter how it is encountered—whether it is seen, heard, recollected, or touched; 2) this dynamic of contagious power can bring effects to anyone, even particularly heinous sinners, or the deceased, regardless of how they interact with the amulet; and 3) interactions with the amulet hasten the widest possible spectrum of effects. These range from the mundane level of expanded wealth and lifespan, to the karmic level of deliverance from negative future lives and rebirth among the gods. But the practice resolutely emphasizes the “expansion of wisdom” as its loftiest possible effect, and even includes the emergence of relics as a concrete side effect indicative of the amulet diagram’s obvious efficacy.

This combination of features comes visibly to the fore in the section that follows. Here, Kong sprul draws in large part from Guru Chos dbang’s *tantra* of *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Samsāra* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*) to offers five additional uses for the diagram, detailing the ritual specifications of each.¹³⁰ The first of these—“pervading the sunny sky” (*nyi ma mkha' khyab*)—calls for the diagram to be affixed to the tip of a banner and ritually treated with the material specifications of a *maṇḍala*, offerings, and oblations, before it is integrated into a liturgy featuring visualizations, mantras, and special supplications. The goal of this usage is to merge the power of the diagram, now infused with the luminous blessings of all buddhas, with the sun and its light, directed by the wish that “all beings on whom its light shines be established in the state of Ārya (Avalokiteśvara).”¹³¹

The second special technique, “pervading the expanse of rivers” (*chu bo'i dbyings khyab*), extends this logic of contagion to large bodies of water by infusing it with the power of the diagram so that “all who drink of it be purified of obscurations and attain qualities.”¹³² The third technique, “a *stūpa* focal point” (*dmigs gtad mchod rten*), entails

¹²⁹ Ibid., 291.5–6: *mtshams med las la sbyad pa yang: sdig sgrib zhi zhing tshe bsod 'phel: zag med ye shes rgyas par 'gyur: chod dang ldan pa smos ci dgos: dbugs la slebs pa'i 'gro ba yang: ngan song thar zhing mtho ris thob: 'chi dus ro dang lhan cig bsreg: bar dor 'phags pas rjes bzung rtags: 'ja' 'od gdung dang ring bsrel 'byung:*

¹³⁰ The parallel passages appear in Gu ru Chos dbang: 286.4–298.6.

¹³¹ Ibid., 292.5: *'od kysis phog pa'i skye 'gro kun: 'phags pa'i go 'phang bkod par gyur:*

¹³² Ibid., 293.3–4: *'thung tshad sgrib dag yon tan thob:*

interring the diagram, right-side up and facing front, inside a *stūpa* situated at a busy thoroughfare or market place.¹³³ The fourth usage, “benefiting beings at the head of roads” (*lam so’i ’gro don*), stipulates writing the diagram on a hard surface and posting it at a location protected from the elements where it can be “seen by everyone,” such as on the door of a temple, a palace gate, or a busy thoroughfare.¹³⁴ The fifth technique, “benefiting beings from the food in the kitchen” (*g.yos khang zas kyi ’gro don*), extends the logic of contagious power and blessings to the kitchen, stipulating that the diagram be etched in the stone or drawn on the clay used for the construction of the hearth, with the following aim in mind:

May all the food prepared in this oven
 Transform into ambrosial elixir
 And thereby purify obscurations, complete accumulations, and
 accomplish alchemy.
 May it purify the debt of food
 And enable sponsors to reach the path to liberation!¹³⁵

All five of these techniques involve their own material specifications and subsequent ritual treatments, including visualizations, mantra recitations, gestures, and the uses of other material objects like offerings, oblations, and other ritual paraphernalia. Furthermore, this adumbration of five techniques ends by insisting that a key point for the efficacy of these pith instructions is that the practitioner also wear the diagram that liberates through wearing while he carries out preparations and ritual treatments. The benefit for ritual masters employing the diagram in this way is then affirmed in a closing citation:

The person who makes efforts to benefit others in this way
 Will be the same as Ārya [Avalokiteśvara] himself.
 He/she will by a sublime upholder of the Conqueror’s lineage,
 And quickly and surely attain awakening.¹³⁶

In this way, the production, use, and range of effects of diagram amulets stipulated in *An Awesome Ocean* is founded foremost on the principle of contagion. This principle finds expression on a number of different registers: first, the written mantra syllables and deity images

¹³³ Ibid., 293.4–6.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 293.6–294.3.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 294.3, and 294.5: *bdud rtsi’i bcud du ’gyur ba yis: sgrib dag tshogs rdzogs bcud len ’grub: zas kyi bu lon kun byang nas: sbyin bdag rnams kyang thar lam zin:*

¹³⁶ Ibid., 294.6–295.1: *de ltar gzhan la phan brtson pa’i: mi de ’phags pa nyid dang mtshungs: rgyal ba’i gdung ’dzin dam pa ste: myur du byang chub nges par ’grub:*

that form the diagram are construed as condensed expressions of awakening, enabling the agency of buddhas to extend across immaterial/material divides; second, the diagram, turned receptacle, then serves as a locus for a welter of ritual activity, whose aim is to further infuse it with the awakened agency of buddhas by ritually enlivening its mantras and deity images with their presence; finally, the product, as doubly animated—once through the use of mantras and deity images in the first instance, and then through the consecration ceremony's infusion of the diagram with awakened presence and agency—poises the diagram amulet to bring its liberatory effects to whomever, whatever, and wherever it comes into contact, no matter the sensory medium, or even whether the recipient is alive, or dead. But its effects, the liturgy implies, nonetheless vary, based on who makes contact with it, and how.

2.h. Liberation through training

The ninth item in the sequence of eleven methods for liberation is “liberation through training in the restoration and purification of Amoghapāśa” (*don yod zhags pa'i gso sbyong bslab grol*),¹³⁷ Amoghapāśa being another form of Avalokiteśvara. “Restoration and purification” typically refers to the fortnightly monastic rite of *pośadha* purification, in which fully-ordained monastics, and novices, acknowledge and remedy their infractions of vows through communally confessing their breaches and reciting the *Prātimokṣasūtra*; alternatively, the term can also refer to when lay people take the eight lay precepts for the duration of the full-moon or new-moon day.¹³⁸ But here this typical communal monastic practice is yoked specifically to Buddha Amoghapāśa and other elements that lift it into a resolutely tantric environment. For instance, the material specifications for the rite are to arrange the *maṇḍala*, receptacle image, and so forth of the *Tamer of Beings* (*'gro 'dul*) on the eighth or fifteenth day of the waxing lunar month, primarily on the four holy days of the Conqueror, or on the new moon of the waning period; lay out offerings, primarily offering lamps, in front of this altar; and wash one's body with blessed water, cense it with incense, and don clean clothes.¹³⁹

The liturgical stipulations are to first “carefully perform by oneself the rite of restoration and purification, as it appears elsewhere,” then

¹³⁷ Ibid., 295.1.

¹³⁸ Krang dbyi sun, et al. 1993: 3029. For editions and studies of the *pośadha* chapter of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayavastu*, see Hu-von Hinüber, 1994; and, more recently, Lueritthikul 2015. This chapter forms the basis for Tibetan understandings of this important monastic confession and restoration rite.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 295.1–3.

perform the liturgy of the *Tamer of Beings*.¹⁴⁰ When doing the front-generation visualization practice of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*, the position of Avalokiteśvara, who is usually in front of the central deity Akṣobhya, is exchanged with Amoghapāśa, yet another form of Avalokiteśvara who normally stands on the southwestern petal of the surrounding eight-petal lotus.¹⁴¹ One is to imagine that from a dot on the forehead of Amoghapāśa, now standing front and center, pours ambrosia the color of moonlight; as soon as it touches one's body one is cleansed of all the stains of obscurations, and the seed of awakening is planted within.¹⁴²

For best results the liturgy directs practitioners to combine this contemplative exercise with the recitation of the long *dhāraṇī* of Amoghapāśa that appears in the *Collection of Tantras (rgyud 'bum)*.¹⁴³ However, the text reassures, if due to time constraints recitation of the long *dhāraṇī* is not feasible, the main session can consist of reciting only the essence mantra. In the breaks between sessions, we are told, one is to do the concluding procedures, such as offering, praise, confession, and the rest, and apply oneself to proper conduct. Then one is to replenish the offerings and repeat the procedure until three such sessions have been performed for the day.¹⁴⁴

The procedure also suggests fasting for a while if one's constitution permits. If it does not permit, the text suggests not rising from one's seat, or relying for support on the ritual purity of abstaining from afternoon meals, as well as meat, garlic, onion, and other ritually impure ingredients.¹⁴⁵

The section concludes by adding that this technique is praised as important in "new translation *tantras* and *kalpas* (*gsar 'gyur gyi rgyud dang rtog pa*), and is thus taken to be a vital practice by the Sa skya monastery of Zhwa lu, among other monastic institutions.¹⁴⁶ The benefits of performing and promoting this practice are then extolled with a closing citation:

Training in such repeatedly
Will pacify illness and demonic disturbances, increase lifespan and merit,
Expand luster, extend youth,

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 295.3.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 295.4.

¹⁴² Ibid., 295.6–296.1.

¹⁴³ This probably refers to *Amoghapāśahṛdayanāmadhāraṇī* (*Don yod zhags pa'i snying po zhes bya ba'i gzungs*), Tōh. 683, *bKa' 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 91 (*rgyud 'bum, Ba*), pp. 1022–1027. For a Sanskrit edition and translation, see Meisezahl 1962.

¹⁴⁴ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 296.1–3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 296.3.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 293.3–4.

And effortlessly give rise to renunciation and compassion.

Even beings who have committed the deeds of immediate retribution
Will surely attain the heavens in the next life.
One should promulgate the activity of this Dharma practice
To those of suitable fortune in the future.

Those who so promulgate it
Will become children of Avalokiteśvara.¹⁴⁷

While much can be said about this practice, perhaps its most striking feature is the integration of a regular communal monastic ritual into a tantric ritual and contemplative framework, replete with tantric contemplative practice, mantra recitation, and the corresponding material setting of *maṅḍala* altar, offerings, and the like. “Training” here most obviously references ethical training in the vows of the monastic order, breaches of which the communal *pośadha* rite is aimed at addressing and purifying. The monastic goal of maintaining ethical purity and effecting ethical purification is echoed here in the material practice—common to the *kriyā yoga* class of *tantras* to which the *Amoghapāśa*-related practices are often said to belong in Tibet¹⁴⁸—of observing physical and dietary hygiene and purity by, for instance, washing the body, donning clean clothes, and abstaining from the consumption of meat, alcohol, and other “polluting” substances.¹⁴⁹ In this regard, the “liberation through training” technique outlined here appears to draw from an earlier Indian Buddhist precedent—the *Amoghapāśapośadhavidhyāmnāya*, attributed to the Kashmiri scholar Śākyaśrībhadrā (1127–1225)—which similarly integrates *pośadha* ritual practice into a tantric context featuring *Amoghapāśa*.¹⁵⁰

In terms of the senses, however, there seems to be little that is unique in this technique, save the sensorial aspects common to much tantric practice of visualizing dynamic photic imagery and transacting with material offerings keyed to the senses. The ways in which this

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 293.A–.6: ‘di ltar yang yang bslab pa yis: nad gdon zhi zhing tshe bsod ‘phel: kha dog rgyas shing lang tsho dar: nges ‘byung snying rje rtsol med skye: mtshams med byas pa ‘i ‘gro ba yang: phyi ma mtho ris nges par thob: la ‘ongs skal par ‘tshams pa yi: chos ‘di phrin las spel bar bya: de ltar spel ba ‘i skyes bu de: spyan ras gzigs dbang sras su ‘gyur :

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, the Tibetan imperial period catalogue, *Lhan dkar ma*, where the principal *Amoghapāśa*-related *tantra*, the *Amoghapāśakalparāja*, is classified as a *kriyā tantra*. Cf. Herrmann-Pfandt 2009: 138. The enduring Tibetan tendency to classify *Amoghapāśa*-related-tantric material as *kriyā tantra* can also be observed in the catalogues of the various *bKa’ ‘gyur* collections.

¹⁴⁹ For more on the role of Indian Buddhist *kriyā yoga tantras* as inspiration and source material for Tibetan Treasure revelations, see Mayer 1994, 2007, 2017, and 2019.

¹⁵⁰ *Don yod zhags pa ‘i gso sbyong gi cho ga ‘i man ngag*, Tōh. 2864, *bsTan ‘gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 37 (*rgyud ‘grel, Nu*), pp. 741–743.

technique effects practitioners, moreover, seems to leave behind the sensory emphasis of the other techniques. No special object is prepared and consecrated to impact those who might have sensory contact with it. Instead, “liberation through training” follows the pattern of standard tantric *sādhana* practice, with the only twist being the focus on the monastic rite of *poṣadha*.

But the range of effects promised through the performance of this *poṣadha* rite nonetheless follows the pattern seen thus far. In this respect, the practice is no ordinary *poṣadha* rite: it cures illness, ensures longevity and a beautiful complexion, generates renunciation and compassion, and even promises rebirth in the heavens, even for especially heinous sinners. The “training” aspect, in this practice’s promise to deliver “liberation through training,” is, in this sense, no ordinary Buddhist technique to form ethical subjects through the cultivation of proper paradigms of conduct and deportment. Rather, it presents ways to circumvent prolonged cultivation, even as it marks itself as centered foremost on the ethical monastic “training” implied in the *poṣadha* rite.

2.i. Liberation through smelling

The next section returns us squarely to the domain of the senses with instructions for the material and ritual preparation of the technique of “liberation through smelling the incense of Padmoṣṅīṣa” (*padma gtsug tor gyi bdug spos tshor grol*).¹⁵¹ Beginning with the material specifications for the preparation of the incense, one is to take as the main ingredient the leaves of juniper trees (*shug pa*) that have grown in sacred places (*gnas*), mix the leaves with as much powdered white and red sandalwood, and agarwood (*a ga ru*) as one can procure, place the powder in a jewel-encrusted vessel, and arrange the vessel on the middle of an altar platform. On a short platform raised above the vessel of powdered ingredients one is to arrange a vase filled with the “25 contents¹⁵²,” adorned with a spout and a band, and tied with a *dhāraṇī* cord. In front of this should be laid out a full arrangement of offerings.¹⁵³

The liturgical preparation once again requires performance of the *Tamer of Beings* ritual (*'gro 'dul gyi las*).¹⁵⁴ But once one has reached the section in the liturgy for the front-generation visualization and recitation, the visualization should focus instead on the vase and its

¹⁵¹ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 296.6.

¹⁵² These are in all likelihood identical to the “25 substances” outlined above.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 296.6–297.2.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.2.

features. One imagines that, although the outside is a jewel vase, the inside is a celestial mansion filled with a current of ambrosia, at the center of which is the eight-petal lotus of the standard *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. Here, however, one exchanges the position of Avalokiteśvara, who, we may recall, is usually the deity in front of Akṣobhya in the *maṇḍala's* central configuration, with Padmoṣṇīṣa, who normally stands on the northwestern petal of the surrounding eight-petal lotus. The liturgy then directs the practitioner to consecrate the vase, performing all the stages, from the invitation of the actual *jñānasattova* Padmoṣṇīṣa to fuse with the *samayasattova* Padmoṣṇīṣa, all the way up to the offering and praise to the newly-consecrated vase.¹⁵⁵

Practitioners are then to hold the *dhāraṇī* cord, while directing at the vase the following recitation and visualization (*gmigs pa gsal btab*):

Based on the *vajra dhāraṇī* cord,
The mantra garland from one's awakened heart (*rang gi thugs*),
The divine assembly is invoked to enter the vase,
And a stream of ambrosia flows from the awakened body
And thereby becomes ambrosia that purifies evil deeds and obscurations.

It fills the vase, overflows from the spout,
And dissolves into the *vajra* incense [below],
Thereby quelling the bad rebirths,
And the suffering of *samsāra*
For whomever smells it.¹⁵⁶

This is immediately followed by the main portion of each session, the recitation of Padmoṣṇīṣa's mantra: *om padmoṣṇīṣa vimale hūm phaṭ*.¹⁵⁷ The instructions stipulate that the measure of the approach stage is taught to be 100,000 recitations, but that the benefits will be greater the more mantras are recited; nonetheless, it adds, 10,000 should be the minimum.¹⁵⁸ At the end of the session, we are told, the practitioner should recite as many as possible of the mantras of the other main deities and entourage deities of the *maṇḍala*, then perform offering and praise, and make supplications.¹⁵⁹ Each session should end by imagining that "the deities melt into light and thereby become the same taste as the stream of water in the vase," sealing the practice

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 297.2–6.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 297.6–298.2: *rang gi thugs nas sngags kyi phreng: rdo rje'i gzungs thag la brten nas: bum pa'i nang zhugs lha tshogs bskul: sku las bdau rtsi'i rgyun babs pas: sdig sgrib sbyong ba'i bdud rtir gyur: de nyid 'phyur zhing kha nas lud: rdo rje'i bdug pa la thim pas: gang gis tshor bas ngan song dang: khor ba'i sdug bsngal zhi bar 'gyur:*

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 298.2.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 298.2–3.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 298.3.

with dedication and aspirations.¹⁶⁰ The liturgy calls for three such sessions daily, until the requisite number of mantra recitations is complete.¹⁶¹

Once complete the practitioner is instructed to sprinkle the incense with the vase water until it is soaked, rub the mixture together, and dry it in the shade.¹⁶² Uses for the incense are outlined next: the text instructs to mix it with other incense, and with substances used in *bsang* and *gsur* rites, such that it wafts into the nostrils of all beings—humans, animals, and, by implication, the deceased.¹⁶³ The text also includes details about its healing properties: the instructions assure that it is proven in experience that this incense is far more beneficial than any other mantra or incense for those afflicted with illness and demonic interference. Additionally, the instruction continues, it is also an incense that can benefit beings on the verge of death.¹⁶⁴

Following the pattern of the other liberations, the section concludes with a verse citation extolling its benefits:

Through just smelling its fragrance
 Social pollution will be dispelled, health will be restored, the faculties will
 become lucid,
 Evil deeds and obscurations will be pacified, obstructers will flee,
 And, ultimately, one will acquire the potential for awakening.¹⁶⁵

This verse is punctuated with a call to promote this technique: “Since it is praised extensively in the *Amoghapaśākalparāja* (*Don zhags rtog pa zhib mo*), one should confidently encourage its practice.”¹⁶⁶

All told, the “liberation through smelling” practice outlined here by Kong sprul follows a pattern quite similar to that of the “liberation through tasting”: medicinal substances are gathered and infused with the agency of awakened beings through ritual proceedings; and the range of effects promised for those who “sense” (*tshor ba*) it extends

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 298.3–4: *lha rnams 'od du zhu bas bum pa'i chu rgyun dang rog cig gyur/*

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 298.4.

¹⁶² Ibid., 298.4–5.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 298.5. *bsang* and *gsur* refers to two different kinds of popular smoke offering rites for propitiating not just the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, but also the deceased, capricious local spirits, and other beings with which one has relationships of past “karmic debt”. For more details on *bsang*, see Karmay 1998: 380–412. For more on *gsur*, see Panglung 1985.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 298.5–6.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 298.6–299.1: *'di yi dri tshor tsam gyis kyang: grin sel khams dwangs dang po gsal: sdig sgrib zhi zhing dgon bgegs 'bros/ mthar thug byang chub rigs can 'gyur:*

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 299.1. *Don yod pa'i zhags pa'i cho ga zhib mo'i rgyal po*, Tōh. 683, *bKa' 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 92 (*rgyud 'bum, Mu*), pp. 3–756. For an incomplete Sanskrit edition, see *Amoghapaśākalparāja* 2001–.

from the medical register of healing, through the karmic register of the purification of evil deeds and obscurations, all the up to the ultimate register of poisoning one for complete awakening. Also like the liberation through tasting, and several other of the techniques outlined thus far, one needn't have any special altruistic intention, devotion, or any other refined subjective quality to feel its effects, whether they set in immediately, or only in the next life.

But of particular emphasis in this technique are the benefits believed to accrue to the ill, and even to the terminally ill, through sensory contact with its medicinal fragrance. Kong sprul appeals to "experience" (*nyams myong*) here to extol this incense as more beneficial than any other medicinal incense used for the treatment of illness. He thus advocates incorporating it into other rituals—such as *bsang* and *gsur*—which center on the burning of substances and the offering of their smoke for a range of purposes. The use of this incense for the dead and dying also figures in this regard, although the precise impact of the fragrance on the future lives of the deceased is not spelled out here with any degree of precision.

2.j. Liberation through making offerings

The final of the eleven techniques consists of material and ritual specifications for "liberation through making offerings," specifically, "making offerings associated with Vajrasāra" (*rdo rje snying po'i mchod sbyin spyad grol*).¹⁶⁷ As these instructions make clear, however, the offerings stipulated here revolve around "burnt offerings" (*me mchod*) and "water offerings" (*chu sbyin*) in particular.¹⁶⁸

The subsection on "burnt offerings" comes first and is itself divided into an elaborate form and an abridged daily practice. The elaborate form begins with material specifications resembling standard *sbyin bsreg* (*homa*) rites.¹⁶⁹ The preparation (*sbyor ba*) requires the construction of a hearth, round in shape, corresponding to the act of pacifying from among the four tantric activities.¹⁷⁰ At the hub is to be drawn an eight-petal lotus marked with a *vajra*, a rim, a perimeter, a stone enclosure, a rosary, and so forth, according to the "common procedure."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 299.1.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.2.

¹⁶⁹ For more details on the history of burnt offering rites in India and Tibet, see Bendor 2000. For an English translation of a Tibetan burnt offering liturgy, see Sherpa Tulku and Perrott 1987.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 299.2. For a discussion of how the four tantric activities serve as an organizational rubric for structuring the material and liturgical details of burnt offerings rites, see Gentry 2017: 336–341.

¹⁷¹ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 299.2–3.

Kindling is to be piled on it in a round shape. To the right of the practitioner should be placed two containers of water and offerings. To his left should be placed ghee, and seven or twenty-one pieces of firewood, as appropriate, which have all been doused with milk, along with sesame seeds. Ladles for scooping and pouring, an “action vase (*las bum*),” and preliminary oblations are also to be assembled for use.¹⁷²

The main part, the liturgical directive, requires the practitioner to first bless the action vase, and its purifying waters, with the mantra of Amṛtakuṇḍali; cast the preliminary oblations; and do the liturgy from refuge and *bodhicitta* up to self-generation and recitation.¹⁷³ The officiant is to then bless the offering substances, and, according to the liturgy, touch the substances to be burned with the seal of a one-pointed *vajra*, cleanse them with *om svāhā*, and then incant in turn the firewood, butter, and sesame seeds with specific mantras, accompanied by visualizations.¹⁷⁴ The fire is then to be lit and doused with the blessed water using *kuśa* glass.¹⁷⁵

The front-generation deity yoga procedure outlined here follows the pattern observed thus far:¹⁷⁶ the central object of the rite, this time the hearth and its blazing fire, becomes the focal point of a series of contemplative visualizations, mantra and liturgical recitations, and actions, by which it is imagined and treated as none other than the *maṇḍala* of the *Tamer of Beings*, but with the Buddha Vajrasāra, whose position in the *maṇḍala* is usually on the northeastern lotus petal surrounding the central deities, standing front and center in the place of Avalokiteśvara. Then, as the ritual practitioner pours into the fire each substance—starting with butter, followed by the pieces of firewood, and then sesame seeds—he or she punctuates each pour with a mantra specific to each substance. Simultaneously, the practitioner imagines that as the materials burn in the fire they become a stream of ambrosia, which dissolves into the mouths of the deities in the *maṇḍala*, thus pleasing them with stainless bliss. As the deities become satiated with the perfectly potent fragrance and taste of the white ambrosia of wisdom, moon light shines forth from their bodies and, striking all beings—oneself and all others—the light purifies and cleanses them of all thoughts, obscurations, and habitual tendencies. The ritual officiant is then to recite the mantra *om āḥ hrīḥ hūm vajrasāra pramardana sarvākarma āvaraṇa śuddhe svāhā*, however many hundreds

¹⁷² Ibid., 299.3–4.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 299.4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 299.4–5.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 300.1.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 300.1–301.3.

or thousands of times as possible, punctuated with supplications of the rite's desired aim.¹⁷⁷ The rite concludes with offering, praise, and confession, before the *jñānasattva* departs into space, and the *samayasattva* melts into light and dissolves indivisibly into the practitioner.¹⁷⁸ The rite is capped off with dedication, aspirations, and auspicious verses.

After the conclusion of the rite, the practitioner is instructed to gather up the ash and deposit it into a large river, whereby its presence will purify all beings that dwell therein of all their obscurations.¹⁷⁹

The abridged daily practice of fire offerings¹⁸⁰ pares down the above material specifications to setting a fire and gathering sesame seeds. The elaborate liturgy, moreover, is reduced to visualizing that out of emptiness emerges Vajrasāra—seated in the center of the fire, now equated with the fire of wisdom—and imagining that all one's evil deeds, obscurations, and habitual tendencies dissolve into the sesame seeds, which, with the mantra *om āḥ hūm*, transform into ambrosia. As the practitioner offers them into the mouth of Vajrasāra *qua* fire, the deities of the *maṇḍala*, now seated in Vajrasāra's heart, become satiated with great, undefiled bliss, and, having purified the evil deeds and obscurations of the practitioner and all others, they bestow on them all accomplishments (*mngos grub, siddhi*). After the practitioner offers sesame seeds to the fire according to this procedure twenty-one times, or as many more times as possible, accompanied with the mantra given above, the deities melt into light and dissolve into him. The abridged rite concludes with dedication and aspirations, and with the promise that performing this technique will purify obscurations, and pacify obstructers and obstacles.

The water offering is likewise simple.¹⁸¹ Its material preparations only require one to arrange clean water containing a small ball of dough in a clean vessel during the early morning hours. The liturgical operation is also rather basic. After the preparation of taking refuge and reciting the *bodhicitta* aspiration, the practitioner is to visualize that in the sky in front of him is Avalokiteśvara, in the form of Ārya Vajrasāra, surrounded by an assembly of buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, *ḍākinīs* and protectors, with the demonic obstructers, the six classes of beings, and, specifically, all the "guests" of one's karmic debtors situated below them. One imagines next that from emptiness emerges the syllable *bhrūm*, which transforms into a vast jewel vase,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 301.3–4.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 301.4–5.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 301.5–6.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 301.6–302.5.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 302.5–303.3.

now coterminous with the water vessel. Inside it is one's own body, which melts into light and transforms into an oblation construed as an ocean of ambrosia. After then saying the mantra syllables *om āḥ hūm* three times, the practitioner images that his mind transforms into Khasarpaṇi Avalokiteśvara and that the offering of his body, in the form of the dough ball, has become an offering to the “guests” of all karmic debtors. The practitioner is to then offer the vase water, with its dough ball, while reciting the mantra *namaḥ sarva tathāgata avalokite om sambhara sambhara* as many times as possible. The practitioner then makes the supplication for the rite's intended aim:

om

You who destroys all evil deeds and obscurations—
 Ārya Vajrasāra
 And assembly of objects of refuge worthy of offerings—
 Accept my body, the oblation of ambrosia!

Grant your blessings! Purify evil deeds and obscurations!
 Bestow accomplishments! Dispel obstacles!
 All demonic obstructers, spirits, and the six classes of beings,
 And especially all guests—karmic debtors—

Eat this stainless ambrosia!
 Purify all karmic debt!
 May all harm-doers and pernicious beings be pacified
 And endowed with the mind of awakening!¹⁸²

The practitioner then meditates in a state of emptiness, without observing the guests to which he has made offerings and the materials offered. The practice concludes with dedication and aspirations.¹⁸³

The section on “liberation through making offerings” as a whole concludes with a verse citation on its “purpose” (*dgos pa*), which corresponds to the “benefits” citations in the concluding passages of the previous ten techniques:

This perfects the accumulations and cheats death.
 It purifies general evil deeds and obscurations, and, specifically,
 The obscuration of consuming offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sgrib*)

¹⁸² Ibid., 303.3–6: *om: sdig sgrib thams cad 'joms mdzad pa'i: 'phags pa rdo rje snying po dang: skyabs gnas mchod 'os rgya mtsho'i tshogs: bdag lus bdud rtsi'i gtor ma bzhes: byin gyis rlobs shig sdig sgrib sbyongs: dngos grub stsol cig bar chad sol: gdon bgegs 'byung po rigs drug dang: khyad par lan chags mgron rnam kun: zag med bdud rtsi 'di gsol la: lan chags bu lon byang bar mdzod: gnod 'tshes gdug rtsub kun zhi zhing: byang chub sems dang ldan par shog:*

¹⁸³ Ibid., 303.6–304.1.

and negative karmic debt.

Therefore, one should perform this regularly.¹⁸⁴

This method, the instructions add in conclusion, is especially praised for purifying [the consumption of] offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sbyong*).

In the “liberation through offering” we thus have a seemingly regular set of instructions for the performance of the pacifying variety of the burnt offering rite, and a simple water offering rite, yoked to the specific purpose of purifying karmic debt that the clergy is believed to accrue from partaking of offerings of food and wealth donated by the devout. This category of karmic debt is clearly regarded to have particularly egregious consequences when it ripens in this and future lives.

Coding this technique as something that can bring “liberation” seems to signal only liberation from the negative effects of this unusually heavy form of karma, although the final statements about the rites’ benefits opens it up into a more positive and generalized set of goals, inclusive of longevity, accumulation of merit, purification of karma, and even the transformation of pernicious karmic debtors into compassionate bodhisattvas. Moreover, presented alongside these goals as side effects is the ability of the contagious power of their residual substances of ash and water to purify the negative karma and obscurations of all the beings with which they come in contact, regardless of their karmic links, or even their engagement of intentionality.

3. Concluding remarks

This paper has considered how Kong sprul’s 19th century liturgical text—*An Awesome Ocean*—details eleven different techniques that purport to confer “liberation” primarily through preparations of and encounters with especially potent sensory objects. In exploring these techniques a number of noteworthy features have come to the fore that shed light on the role of sensory experience in popular Buddhist practice in Tibet. The initial gesture here of tracing the pedigree of these eleven practices has also shown that they are each connected to earlier revelations in Tibet, and still earlier practices prevalent in India, some stretching back to mainstream Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist rites and material religious practices.

But *An Awesome Ocean* more specifically reflects the prior integration of these techniques into tantric ritual frameworks, a

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 304.1: ‘dis ni tshogs rdzogs ‘chi ba bslu: sdig sgrib spyi dang khyad par du: dkor sgrib lan chags ngan pa sbyong: de phyir rgyun du brtson par bya:

process which by all indications was already well underway in Indian Buddhist communities prior to the importation of Buddhist traditions to Tibet. Kong sprul's packaging of these eleven techniques together—integrating them within the framework of the eleven-deity *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*—and his extension to all eleven of the promise to confer “liberation,” appears to be his own unique contribution to this process. Indeed, Kong sprul's eleven liberations, when viewed as a continuation of the systemization of Buddhist material practices first set in motion in India, and then made more evident in Tibet by the coinage of the rubric of four liberations, and its gradual expansion to six, and eight liberations, stands out as the most extensive rubric of its kind.

Yet the liturgy clearly shows that despite Kong sprul's success in integrating these practices to an eleven-deity *maṇḍala*, each technique is to be practiced separately, not in tandem; hence, the central deity of the *maṇḍala* changes position according to the specifications of each technique. Moreover, to reach eleven modes of liberation and thereby match a technique of liberation to each deity of the *maṇḍala* seems to have required Kong sprul to enlist practices that do not fit very neatly the typical pattern and material ethos of this set of practices as a whole. We thus find included here a technique for liberation through cultivating a vision of Amitābha's pure land and the firm resolve to be reborn there—otherwise part of standard Mahāyāna pure land-related practice. Although Kong sprul follows established tradition in thoroughly embedding this technique in a tantric liturgical framework,¹⁸⁵ it nonetheless stands out among the eleven techniques in not strictly requiring the use, preparation, and/or consecration of a potent material object to serve as focal point. Nonetheless, it is the object-like other-power of Buddha Amitābha's compassion and previous aspiration that is the primary cause of efficacy here, even as the liturgy requires practitioners to actively attune their minds to the reality of his pure land through visualization, recitation, and gesture.

Further along these lines, we also encountered the technique of liberation through training in the restoration and purification of monastic vows—the practice of *poṣadha*—which had been an integral part of communal Buddhist monastic life from a very early period. Kong sprul appears to follow Indian Buddhist tradition in embedding *poṣadha* in a resolutely tantric framework, even as he newly integrates it within the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. Nonetheless, the liberation through cultivating is similar to the liberation through training in terms of the private and immaterial scope of its efficacy—neither technique calls for the production and/or consecration of a power

¹⁸⁵ Halkias 2013.

object that promises to have widespread efficacy for entire communities.

In contrast, the nine remaining techniques each centers on the use, preparation, and/or consecration of a sacred object that becomes imbued with sufficient contagious power to positively impact everything and everywhere with which it comes into contact. In this sense they are resolutely public in scope. When taking stock of the ritual preparations of their featured objects, all nine of these techniques appear to be rooted in a combination of Indian Buddhist consecration rituals, tantric grimoires, and tantric medical practices, but with a few important distinctions.

The objects that feature in these nine techniques are each composed of a combination of ingredients, some of which are thought to have their own intrinsic power, and others of which are believed to accrue power through their preparation and consecration in ritual settings. Indeed, with few notable exceptions, these objects are manufactured, not revealed. In other words, they are by and large not “Treasure substances,” per se, but objects to be manufactured based on the directives of “Treasure teachings.” So while these nine techniques each features some object or another that acquires power and acts on people and environments, only a few key ingredients—relics, medicinal substances, deity images, *dhāraṇīs*, mantras, etc.—are presented as embodying the intrinsic power so typical of Treasure substances. Human beings still have to augment their power through intentionally focusing cognitive, vocal, and physical activity toward them in ritual settings.

The methods by which they do so feature in shorthand form many of the elements of standard consecration rites, which themselves share the basic pattern of tantric liturgical practice: objects are visualized as buddhas (*samayasattva*), actual buddhas (*jñānasattva*) are invoked and merged with the objects visualized as buddhas through a focused choreography of visualization, mantra, *mudrā*, and material transactions; and finally, the objects are treated as actual buddhas, becoming focal points of veneration and worship.¹⁸⁶ Ultimately this treatment enables objects and their wielders to extend the agency of the empowering awakened presence that inhabits them to everything and anything with which they come in contact. In this way, these nine techniques adumbrate the diverse sensory and cognitive media by which awakened agency can be most effectively distributed in the world to positively impact others.

But alongside the manufacture and consecration of particularly revered objects, such as statues, *stūpas*, buddha images, relic pills, and

¹⁸⁶ For an excellent study of consecration rituals in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

sacred circular diagrams, we find the consecration of other substances and objects such as sand, water, food, the hearth, fragrances, and fire, which are not typically marked as especially venerable. The empowerment of such seemingly quotidian substances to act on beings and environments is something these techniques share with those found in the grimoire and medical sections of several Indian Buddhist *tantras*, where the entire phenomenal world and all its myriad substances are construed as intrinsically sacred; through their various permutations and combinations, in consultation with associated *materia medica* and *materia sacra*, they become primed for use in healing, protection, destruction, and other such operations.

These Indian Buddhist tantric techniques, however, generally confine the range of their efficacy to pragmatic affairs. There are some notable exceptions to this general pattern, which do mention the purification of karma, but even in such instances the fruition of “liberation” rarely if ever figures.¹⁸⁷ In Kong sprul’s liturgy, however, objects’ scope of efficacy is broadened beyond the pragmatic sphere so typical of tantric grimoires and remedies to explicitly include the loftier goals of purification of negative karma, positive rebirth, and liberation from *samsāra* as a whole. Nonetheless, the efficacy of most of these objects is accretive—that is, each object, while keyed specifically as a means of liberation, also subsumes the entire range of pragmatic and karmic goals as positive side effects of sensory contact with it. In this sense, the techniques, taken as a whole, broaden the usual sense of liberation as liberation from *samsāra* to include freedom from illness, negative circumstances, particularly difficult karmic effects, and the lower realms. In this way, the explicit promise that such things are powerful enough to specifically confer liberation, and not just from pragmatic misfortunes, but also from the effects of negative deeds, and even from *samsāra* in its entirety, appears to be a particularly Tibetan extension and formalization of a similar strain of thought that had already been prevalent in Indian Buddhist circles. We have seen, moreover, that the objects are not identical in this regard. Instead, the liturgy displays the tendency to frame each object as appropriate for addressing a specific range of effects, even as considerable overlap is observable in each case, and, more importantly, the whole range of pragmatic, karmic, and soteriological registers is integrated in each technique.

Another accretive aspect of these techniques, beyond their range of efficacy, is how they reach their intended goals. Despite the

¹⁸⁷ See, for instance, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan’s defense of the Indian Buddhist pedigree of liberation through the senses practices, as presented in Gentry 2017: 171–290.

demarcation of these techniques of liberation into seemingly tidy categories, each according to a specific sensory medium—seeing, hearing, tasting, etc.—the boundaries between them tends to be porous. This porousness is especially evident with substances, pills, liquids and the like that liberate through tasting, drinking, and so forth. Such substances can, for instance, sometimes also liberate through merely touching, wearing, smelling, and even hearing about them. The power of these substances, moreover, also seeps into the persons who discover or prepare them, and into the places in which they were first discovered, and later ritually treated and distributed.

The operative principle of efficacy in such cases is clearly physical contact, contiguity, and contagion. Indeed, as Kong sprul describes them in the colophon of his liturgy, they are “methods that lead to permanent bliss all who have contact with them.”¹⁸⁸ The key passage here, worded as “all who have contact,” renders the Tibetan phrase *'brel tshad*, literally, the “full range, measure, or extent” of “contact, or connection.” Simply stated, the efficacy of such objects is not limited to a single medium. And their potency is contagious—it spreads to whomever, whatever, and wherever they have contact, no matter the sensory medium involved.

This logic of contagion poises these objects to act as powerful focal points of communal action, even as their efficacy rarely requires direct intentionality to be felt. Thus, although the concerted intentionality of ritual specialists is clearly paramount in the preparation of such objects, the role of intentionality for the wider population who would experience their positive effects is only key in a few instances, and peripheral or non-existent in most others. Through simply living, sensing—and dying—in environments saturated with these specially prepared, positioned, and distributed reliquaries, sounds, pills, sands, waters, amulets, smells, and so forth, entire communities—human and non-human—can hope to feel some respite from the pragmatic misfortunes that beset them in this life, and gain some purchase on their prospects for the next. The promise of “liberation” from *samsāra*, or, at the very least, sowing the seed for such in some distant future, orients and structures this set of goals within the soteriological framework of mainstream Buddhist doctrine. More importantly, perhaps, it also ensures, as Kong sprul puts it in his verses that close the liturgy, that “everyone, high and low, is brought benefit.”¹⁸⁹ In sum, Kong sprul’s liturgy presents a set of practices that positively utilizes the fullest possible range of sensory experience, yoking this to

¹⁸⁸ *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 340.4–.5: */'brel tshad gtan bder 'khrīd pa'i thabs/*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.5: */mchog dman kun la phan thogs pa/*

cognitive contemplative exercises and other features of Buddhist training, all with the express goal of touching the lives of all beings—providing pragmatic help, karmic purification, or spiritual refinement, as the case may be—through any kind of sensory or cognitive link, regardless of the medium involved, or even the intentionality of the experiencer. In Kong sprul’s liturgy we thus find a set of Buddhist practices thoroughly centered on the sensorium of sentient life.

It is hoped that this presentation and analysis of a sensory-focused set of practices whose enduring popularity among Himalayan Buddhists can be readily witnessed upon even a casual visit to Himalayan Buddhist communities might help attune scholars of religion to the richness and depth with which some Buddhist traditions positively enlist sensory experiences with captivating objects in shaping and transforming sensibilities.

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Luminous visions and liberatory amulets in Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's Great Perfection anthology

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In Buddhist philosophy, the five senses are generally considered to be deceptive, for they do not reveal reality-as-it-is. Ordinary beings perceive phenomena in dualistic terms, with a fundamental difference between a perceiving subject and perceived objects. In conventional Yogācāra philosophy, sensory perception is tainted by conceptualism, as it is conditioned by imprints in the foundational consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*, *kun gzhi rnam shes*).¹ Since perceptions are filtered by conceptual thought, ordinary sensory perception reinforces a mistaken, dualistic view on reality. One could ask, however: might there be a way to transcend this dualism through the very process of sensory perception? I believe we can answer in the affirmative and can find in various traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism different ways to employ the senses in the project to go beyond dualism.

This paper discusses the role of sensory perception in an indigenous Tibetan tantric tradition, the Great Perfection or *rDzogs chen*, in particular the anthology of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*). The anthology was revealed in 1366 in Byang, Bare Divine Rock (Zang zang lha brag) on the Mountain Resembling a Heap of Poisonous Snakes (sDug sprul dpungs 'dra). It describes a variety of practices and topics pertaining to both the Great Perfection and normative tantra; but what is of particular interest to us here, in the context of examining the role of the senses, are the texts discussing the practice of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) and the cycle of *The Liberation Through Wearing* (*btags grol*).

¹ Germano and Waldron 2006: 45. For an evaluation of various views on concepts in the Yogācāra, see Sur's 2017 translation of Rongzom's *Entering the Way of the Great Vehicle*: 99–105.

1. *Direct transcendence and its foundation in subtle physiology*

The principal source for the practices of direct transcendence in rGod ldem's anthology is the cycle of *The Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava* (*Padma'i snyan brgyud*),² although the anthology contains another five texts that discuss the topic.³ The practice of direct transcendence features several techniques that all utilize the sense of vision in the project to attain enlightenment. A yogi may train his visionary ability by gazing at clear blue sky free from clouds,⁴ or impress upon his mind the presence of one's indwelling divinity by looking at images of deities through a crystal.⁵ As an alternative technique, not mentioned in *The Unimpeded Realization*, some Great Perfection texts such as Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings* discuss sensory deprivation as a means of transcending duality, and prescribe that seekers stay in a dark retreat completely removed from light.⁶

The paradigmatic technique of direct transcendence entails gazing at a light source, such as the sun, moon, or a flame. This is described in *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava, The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled the Letterless Oral Transmission Which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom*. When a yogi looks at rays of the setting sun by squinting his eyes, he sees circular spheres of light or *bindus* (*thig le*) and luminous chain-like manifestations called the *vajra* chains. After patiently gazing and attending to the *bindus*, they begin to join together, and with sustained practice the phenomena of light form various patterns such as many-eyed designs, nets, lotuses and castles. These in turn transform into faces of deities and eventually into the *maṇḍalas* of the

² Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *The Unimpeded Realization* (from here on UR) II: 393–459. For an analysis of Padmasambhava's role in rGod ldem's anthology, see Turpeinen 2018: 152–157.

³ These five texts are *The Three Nails of the Key Points - A Guide Text Composed by Vimalamitra* (*Khrid yig gnad kyi gzer bu gsum pa bi ma la mi tras mdzad pa*) UR II: 335–352, *A Guide Text on the Direct Perception of Dharmatā of the Unsurpassed Exceedingly Secret Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po yang gsang bla na med pa chos nyid mngon sum gyi khrid yig*) UR II: 353–392, *The Twenty One Introductions of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po'i ngo sprod nyi shu rtsa gcig*) UR III: 555–564, *The Lamp of Unimpeded Wisdom From the Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa ye shes zang thal gyi sgron ma*) UR IV: 27–58, and *The Secret Lamp: A Text on the Key points of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i gnad yig gsang ba'i sgron ma*) UR III: 141–162.

⁴ *Khrid yig gnad kyi gzer bu gsum pa bi ma la mi tras mdzad pa*, UR II: 349.

⁵ *The Twenty One Introductions of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po'i ngo sprod nyi shu rtsa gcig*) UR III: 558.

⁶ Klong chen pa, *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*): 282.

peaceful and wrathful deities.⁷ This is a process of natural visionary manifestation: no visualization is employed in the practice. After the complete efflorescence of the luminous visions, they subside into emptiness.

In the *rDzogs chen* philosophy of the *Seminal Heart* (*sNying thig*) strand, these visions are considered to be one's own projections, or self-display (*rang snang*), inseparable from oneself. Their projection onto the external field of vision is enabled by the subtle energy body and its network of channels and centers. The *Seminal Heart* physiology subscribes to the general ideas of the subtle body in the *Anuyoga* tantras, but with notable additional ideas discussed below. The general tantric theory on the subtle body describes the central energy channel (*avadhūti*, *kun 'dar ma*) that runs along the spine from the groin to the crown. This channel contains several energy centers (*cakra*, *'khor lo*), most notably at the groin, navel, heart, throat and the crown, along with thousands of other channels (*nāḍī*, *rtsa*) that branch off from the energy centers. The channels are conduits for subtle energy or winds (*prāṇa*, *rlung*) and nucleus-like concentrations of energy that have causal potency, or *bindus* (*thig le*). In sum, this network of channels and centers in the subtle body is different from the physical body, but closely related to it as the causal generator of many physical functions.

The *Seminal Heart* innovations concerning the subtle body theory entail positing dual systems of perception that could be called wisdom and karmic networks. The tradition elaborates upon the difference between these networks by describing the distinctive *bindus* flowing in channels within them. Conventional *bindus* that perform activities related to the four elements are of karmic nature, while the wisdom network contains ultimate *bindus* that engender the visions of wisdom, and natural *bindus* that are the wisdom of *dharmatā* (reality-as-it-is) in meditative equipoise.⁸ Another innovative element in the *Seminal Heart* physiology is to locate one's inherent divinity, or buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*, *de bzhin gzhegs pa'i snying po*) in the subtle body of a human being. It is said to reside at the sublime palace of the exalted mind (*tsitta*) at the heart center in

⁷ *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud*, UR II: 426, 432–434.

⁸ For subtle physiology, see *Intrinsically Clear Primordial Wisdom - A Commentary on the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection of the Great Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra Transmitted to the King* (also entitled *The Great Exegesis of the Oral Transmission of Vinalamitra*) (*Bi ma mi tra'i snyan brgyud chen mo rgyal po la gdams pa yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i 'grel pa ye shes rang gsal: bi ma la'i snyan brgyud 'grel tig chen mo yang zer*) IV: 253–272.

the form of the *maṇḍalas* of the peaceful deities and at the conch chamber of the brain as the wrathful deities.⁹

In the successful practice of direct transcendence, the *maṇḍalas* of deities flow from the brain and heart centers via a secret, luminous wisdom channel called *kati* or The Great Golden Channel¹⁰ that connects the energetic center of the heart to the eyes. From the eyes, the visions are reflected in the sky to be perceived externally. In contrast, ordinary perception operates via an impure, karmic network of subtle channels. According to *The Oral Transmissions of Padmasambhava*, five of the most important channels connect the central channel to the sense organs, but they “cannot manifest *dharmatā* in direct perception.”¹¹ Thus, the visionary perception of divine forms is based on the alternative wisdom network of perception that overlaps the ordinary organs and channels of perception. An important part of the wisdom network is the tip of the luminous wisdom channel at the eyes called the Far Reaching Watery Lamp (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*).¹² It is a subtle organ of visionary perception, or a wisdom version of the ordinary eye, as it is instrumental in the perception of the visions by the luminous network.

It is notable that *rDzogs chen* philosophy posits a separate organ and network of visionary perception. In the wisdom network, seeing is emphasized over other senses, even though luminous wisdom channels going to other sensory organs are mentioned in the *Seminal Heart* literature. What is special about the sense of vision? Arguably, vision is the most subtle and spiritual sense. It is the only sense not

⁹ *The Second Root Pith Instruction on the Precious Oral Transmission on the Authentic Meaning (Yang dag don gyi snyan brgyud rin po che rtsa ba'i man ngag gnyis pa)* UR II: 398, and *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom from the Great Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud)* UR II: 432.

¹⁰ *Rosary of Jewels Tantra (Rin chen phreng ba'i rgyud)* UR III: 120.

¹¹ *Chos nyid mngon sum du gsal bar mi nus so: The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission which Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom from the Great Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon sum du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po bzhugs so: padma'i snyan brgyud)* UR II: 428.

¹² *Rosary of Jewels Tantra (Rin chen phreng ba'i rgyud)* UR III:90–91 and *The Second Root Pith Instruction on the Precious Oral Transmission on the Authentic Meaning (Yang dag don gyi snyan brgyud rin po che rtsa ba'i man ngag gnyis pa)* UR II: 401, 440.

directly involved with a physical medium of sensation. The eyes can perceive objects across vast distances, which is why the watery lamp of the eyes is called far reaching, seeing even into space or other realms in certain states of visionary perception.

2. *Non-dual perception and the role of vision in direct transcendence*

Within classical Buddhist thought, vision is unique among the senses, and *rDzogs chen* philosophy takes this as a starting point for building an elaborate theory and practice of how to attain enlightenment through seeing. In creating distinct and distinguishable networks of visual perception, the *rDzogs chen* philosophy avoids the Yogācāra dilemma of foundational dualism whereby sensory perception is already tainted by imprints in the *ālayavijñāna*. In the *rDzogs chen* theory of visual perception, only the karmic network is tainted with dualism, while the luminous network of wisdom channels and energy centers presents a possibility of awakened, non-dual perception of reality-as-it-is. Still, one might ask whether this theory of perception implies dualism in itself. Klong chen pa addresses this indirectly by stating that the conventional *bindus* and the lesser meditative attainments they support are not constitutive of the real path, while the ultimate *bindus* are.¹³ Thus, the reality status of the karmic network as conventional, and isolated from the wisdom network, ensures the absence of dualism.

If only the wisdom network is the real path, what exactly is the non-dual perception it can engender? It is the *rDzogs chen* philosophical idea of self-display (*rang snang*) or the perception of appearances as inseparable from oneself, free from the dichotomy of self and other. This form of visual perception amounts to recognition of reality and awakening, just as the Primordial Buddha Samantabhadra recognized the first cosmogonic manifestations arising from the ground (*gzhi*) as not separate from himself.

The *rDzogs chen* concept of creativity or dynamic energy (*rtsal*) is also closely related to the experience of direct transcendence. Creativity is the power driving the visionary manifestations—or manifestation in general—inherent in empty awareness. In ordinary human experience, the functions of creativity have become distorted due to karmic delusion and one perceives illusory appearances of *samsāra*, taking them to be real. As a sign of the potential to transcend this state, one can see *bindus* and *vajra* chains if one gazes at light sources or an empty sky. When the power of creativity is perfected,

¹³ Klong chen pa, *The Treasury of Words and Meanings*: 258–259.

one perceives the *vajra* chains as the *maṇḍala* deities. This concept of creativity is an underlying foundation of the direct transcendence contemplation: the visions manifest due to the intrinsic creativity of emptiness—creative for the very reason that it is saturated with pristine awareness (*rig pa*), another important element of *rDzogs chen* philosophy.

The process of transformation through direct transcendence also reflects the *rDzogs chen* philosophical views on perception. Direct transcendence is essentially a process of radical reconfiguration of one's relationship with the world by using the sense of vision as an instrument. The practice places the self in a creative, participatory relationship with phenomena in which one's patient attention to the external visual appearances triggers fundamental transformation in those appearances as the *bindus* begin to link and transform. This, in turn, causes profound changes in the perceiving subject, as the perception begins to occur via the luminous wisdom network, resulting in the increasing revelation of reality, such as the realization of the insubstantial nature of phenomena, fundamental interconnectedness, fluidity of boundaries and dualistic opposites, "the apprehending subject and apprehended object becoming increasingly diminished"¹⁴ and growing freedom from *saṃsāra*. As this process of perceived interaction of the self and the world continues to unfold, the yogi eventually transcends all dualistic boundaries and attains the awareness and perception of self-display.

The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The Ultimate Letterless within All Oral Transmissions describes some of the attainments associated with the visions:

When you first see drop-like white *bindus* separately, you have seen the intrinsic essence of awareness. When you see connected *bindus*, you have severed the continuity to be born in the lower realms. When you see appearances resembling chains and water pipes, you have departed from the chronic disease of *saṃsāra*. When you see abodes of five-colored light, you will be born in the immaculate *nirmāṇakāya* pure lands. When you see crown protuberances and half bodies of deities, you will attain enlightenment in the *bardo*, or the intermediate state between death and rebirth. When you see perfect bodies of male and female buddhas in union, you will attain enlightenment without abandoning the physical body. At this moment, this very seeing that is clear, unobstructed, and unimpeded is the unmistakable view of the realization (*dgongs pa*) of

¹⁴ *gZung 'dzin je chung je chung la song ba (Ye shes mngon sun du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po)* UR II: 430.

unimpeded wisdom. You have seen bare the quintessential core of the secret *bindu*, the essence of *dharmakāya* awareness.¹⁵

This citation not only illustrates the stages of liberatory attainment that result from the practice, but also highlights the unique role of vision in the practice of direct transcendence: it is the very seeing of these sacred manifestations that causes the realizations of wisdom and increasing freedom from *samsāra*.

Thus, we can observe two ways the sense of vision functions in direct transcendence. First, gazing at appearances is used as a tool along all the stages of practice from the initial manifestation of the *bindus* to the full-blown perception of the *maṇḍalas* and their final dissolution. Upon successful practice, one's gaze becomes such a liberating tool that wherever one looks, everything manifests as *maṇḍalas* of buddhas, and one's gaze has the power to turn one's body into the rainbow light of the five kinds of wisdom. *The Oral Transmission of Padmasambhava: The First Root of the Exceedingly Profound Pith Instructions Entitled The Letterless Oral Transmission That Teaches the Direct Perception of Primordial Wisdom* states:

If you focus your consciousness one-pointedly on your hands and fingers, they manifest as rainbow colors, and your body becomes liberated in the manner of rainbow colors.¹⁶

Second, vision is used to describe the ultimate nature of reality: the emptiness of *dharmakāya*, or enlightened realization, becomes visual. These visions are said to be "the *dharmakāya* awareness," so *dharmakāya* is not merely emptiness but is equated with pristine awareness (*rig pa*), and it is visual. The very seeing of the visions is said to be the correct view, so the view of empty awareness or unimpeded wisdom amounts to seeing these visions. However, according to rGod ldem and Klong chen pa, the visions subside into

¹⁵ *Dang po thig le dkar thig thig pa re mthong ba de: rig pa'i rang ngo mthong ba yin: de nas thig le sbrel ma mthong ba dang: ngan song gyi skye rgyun chod pa yin: lcags sgrog dang za ra tshags lta bu mthong ba'i dus na: 'khor ba'i gcong nad thon pa yin: 'od lnga'i khyim mthong ba'i dus na: sprul pa'i shing khams rnam par dag par skye ba yin: dbu'i gtsug tor dang phyed sku mthong ba'i dus na: bar do na sangs rgya ba yin: sku rdzogs pa dang yab yum mthong ba'i dus na: phung po ma bor bar sangs rgya'o: da ltar mthong ba ma 'gags par zang thal le gsal ba 'di ka ye shes zang thal gyi dgongs pa phyin ci ma log pa'i lta ba yin te: thig le gsal ba'i yang snying: rig pa chos kyi sku'i ngo bor cer kyi mthong ba yin: (sNyan brgyud thams cad kyi nang na yi ge med pa mthar thug pa: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 445.*

¹⁶ *Rangi gi lag sor 'ja' tshon du gsal ba gsal ba la shes pa rtse gcig tu gtad na: phung po 'ja' tshon bzhin du grol 'gro'o: (Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po las ye shes mngon suu du bstan pa'i snyan brgyud yi ge med pa zhes bya ba shin tu zab pa'i man ngag gi rtsa ba dang po: padma'i snyan brgyud) UR II: 435.*

emptiness in the cessation of *dharmatā*, the fourth and last vision of direct transcendence, which highlights the tool-like nature of the visions. The final cessation of the visions is the supreme attainment of direct transcendence, which suggests that the state devoid of visions is higher than the visionary state. If this is the case, can the visionary manifestations actually describe the ultimate nature of reality, as indicated in the citation above? The key here is the concept of creativity (*rtsal*): the visionary manifestations are inherent in the *dharmakāya* awareness. It seems that the reality status of the visions is similar to a buddha's divine, luminous energy bodies, or *sambhogakāyas* ("body of bliss") that emanate from the *dharmakāya*. Ultimately, they are one with the *dharmakāya* due to the unity of the three bodies (*trikāya*). Thus, it makes sense to speak of the direct transcendence visions as a description of ultimate reality, and define seeing them as the correct view. This is also illustrated by the concept of self-display (*rang snang*), which is a visual description of the non-dual, empty nature of reality.¹⁷

The *Seminal Heart* philosophical ideas underlying direct transcendence visions resonate well with the Mahāyāna theory of the three bodies, but they are notably different from the typical Madhyamaka or Middle Way views. In Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, it is stated that the ultimate nature of reality is emptiness, which refers to the deconstruction of all assertions and constructions about reality.¹⁸ Nothing can be established as existent, non-existent, neither or both, so everything is empty. The Madhyamaka emptiness does not include awareness or perception as part of the ultimate, empty reality. Thus, the *rDzogs chen* portrayal of the ultimate nature of reality in terms of awareness and visual perception is in stark contrast with the Nāgārjunian view of ultimate reality as just emptiness, but bears resemblance to Yogācāra descriptions of enlightenment that contain cognitive aspects, i.e. various types of wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁷ It is notable that a later *rDzogs chen* scholar, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624) differs sharply from rGod ldem and Klong chen pa in his view on the dissolution of the visions in the cessation of *dharmatā*. According to Sog bzlog pa, it is only the structures of dualistic perception that cease in the fourth vision and one continues to see the pure visions of *maṇḍala* deities without clinging to them. His writings also suggest that this issue was a point of contention among Tibetan authors of his time. (See Gentry 2017: 210–216.)

¹⁸ For a translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, see *Nagarjuna's Middle Way* by Siderits and Katsura or *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* by Padmakara Translation Group.

¹⁹ For a doxographical discussion of wisdom in both the broader Buddhist tradition and Rongzompa's extant philosophical works, see Almogi 2009. For a more comprehensive treatment of Rongzompa's Great Perfection, see Rongzom 2017.

That being said, the views of Madhyamaka and the *Seminal Heart* are similar in the way they embrace the connectedness of all phenomena. The Madhyamaka's doctrine of emptiness amounts to interdependence, or the notion that all phenomena can arise, function, and cease only in an interrelated web of connections. All phenomena are connected and empty of inherent existence, so there is no dualism of subject and object. In the *Seminal Heart*, the non-duality of self and other is evident in the concept of self-display: ultimately all appearances of phenomenal objects are inseparable from oneself.

3. Liberation through wearing

The cycle of *The Liberation Through Wearing*²⁰ in the third volume of rGod ldem's anthology is quite different from the teachings on direct transcendence, but nevertheless contains notable parallels such as the idea of conspicuous sensory engagement for the purpose of attaining enlightenment. Similar to direct transcendence, the idea of liberation through wearing is also rooted in the *rDzogs chen* philosophy, specifically, in the possibility of accessing enlightenment simply and directly, in a manner reminiscent of Samantabhadra's recognition in the beginning of cosmogony.

The Liberation Through Wearing details the preparation of amulets to be worn, and contains tantras and mantras that are to be enclosed within the amulets. As the name *Liberation Through Wearing* suggests, the primary sense employed in the liberatory process is the sense of touch. Wearing the amulet under one's clothing on the skin transmits the liberating blessings. The idea of blessings transferred through touching is a common one in Tibetan religious culture. For example, a lama touches people to give blessings, and one touches sacred objects and scriptures with one's head to access the blessings they contain.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the concept of liberation through wearing is connected to other types of liberation through the senses that are often listed together as a group of four liberations (*grol ba bzhi*). The most renowned example is liberation through hearing (*thos grol*), found in Kar ma Gling pa's fourteenth century revelation, *The Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (*Bar do thos grol*), better known

²⁰ *bTags grol skor*, UR III:185–281. The cycle is augmented by five chapters in *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to this Great Tantra (an Explanatory Tantra)* (*rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btab pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud*) UR IV: 154–177.

as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This book is read to a dying person, a process that extends for a number of days after death; hearing the instructions is thought to present a possibility of liberation for the deceased.

Liberation through tasting (*myong grol*) involves ingesting sacred substances such as ritually produced pills that are distributed by lamas to devotees, or sometimes are made available for purchase in monasteries. Liberation through seeing (*mthong grol*) is generally not connected to direct transcendence in this context, but is associated with pilgrimage and the liberating effect of seeing sacred images or *stūpas* containing relics of accomplished masters. However, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan presents a rather radical argument that direct transcendence is a form of liberation through seeing, due to the power of the visions to disclose reality.²¹ Sometimes liberations through touching (*reg grol*) and sensing (*tshor grol*) or recollecting (*dran grol*) are added to the list, making a total of six liberations. The starting point for these liberations via the senses is in the Indian Buddhist ideas of the immense blessing power of the Buddha's relics, *stūpas* and other sacred objects, that are capable of imparting salvific effect upon contact. In Tibet, the idea of liberation through sensory contact started gaining currency in the twelfth century. A prominent example is the promotion of the enlightening power of Avalokiteśvara's six syllable mantra by Nyang rel Nyi ma 'od zer and later on by Guru Chos dbang.²²

In Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's anthology, the idea of liberation through wearing embodies the *rDzogs chen* possibility of spontaneous or automatic liberation (*sangs mi rgya ba'i dbang med*)²³ regardless of one's intellectual abilities or karmic baggage, through the blessing power of sacred amulets and texts. The idea of the buddha nature that is readily accessible via methods as basic as recognition is reflected in the possibility of becoming enlightened automatically upon wearing the amulets endowed with the liberating power of blessings. However, the liberation through wearing will not necessarily take place in this life. Instead, the texts frequently present

²¹ Gentry 2017: 186–206.

²² For the most in-depth analysis of the Indian and Tibetan roots of liberation through senses, see Gentry 2017: 171–290. In particular, for a discussion of liberation through tasting, see Gentry, 2017: 259–283 and 296–316. Note also Gentry's article in this same issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*. In addition, for a discussion of liberation through tasting and seeing, see Gayley, 2007.

²³ *rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btap pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud*, UR IV: 155.

a disclaimer by stating that the liberating effect may only reach maturation in the *bardo* or the next life.²⁴

Similar to wearing the amulets, the scriptures they contain also have a liberating effect upon seeing or being heard, although these venues are much less accessible means to liberating blessings. The sacred tantras of the cycle are written with gold or other precious stones, covered in five kinds of silk, and then placed in a jewel amulet.²⁵ Thus, only educated practitioners of *The Unimpeded Realization* or specialists involved in making the amulets would be able to lay their eyes on the tantras of the *Liberation Through Wearing* before they are enclosed in an amulet.

The sense of hearing, however, has a prominent role in the famous *Prayer of Samantabhadra* (*Kun bzang smon lam*) originating from *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by Merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to This Great Tantra*. This tantra augments the *Liberation Through Wearing* cycle with five chapters that discuss the liberation through hearing, embedded in a larger explication of *Seminal Heart* philosophy and practice. *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* is the most widely available method to disseminate the liberatory power of the sacred letters contained in rGod lden's anthology. In general, the tantras that liberate through wearing align themselves with the spontaneously liberating power of direct transcendence and ascribe the preparation of the amulets to *rDzogs chen* yogis. These tantras also state that the amulets should be given only to worthy recipients.²⁶ In contrast, *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by Merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to This Great Tantra* encourages the yogi to generate himself as Samantabhadra and recite *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* so that everyone can hear it—especially on auspicious days such as the time of solar and lunar eclipses, earth quakes, and the equinoxes. By merely hearing the prayer, all living beings of the three realms are said to attain enlightenment in three life times.²⁷

How are we to understand this eschatological power of *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* to enlighten all beings in the realms of samsara? The concept of attaining enlightenment within three lifetimes merely

²⁴ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas (the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor)* UR III:214, *The Great Liberation Through Wearing (bTags grol chen po)* UR III: 234, and *The Exceedingly Profound Liberation through Wearing of the Nine Key points of Awareness (Rig pa gnad dgu'i btags grol shin tu zab pa)* UR III: 270.

²⁵ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas from the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor)* UR III: 215–216.

²⁶ *The Great Liberation Through Wearing (bTags grol chen po)* UR III: 235.

²⁷ *rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btab pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud: bshad rgyud* UR III: 177.

through sensory engagement with sacred scriptures is a striking notion, especially when contrasted with the law of karma and its ubiquitous and unforgiving character. One could argue that the mere encounter with the amulets or *The Prayer of Samantabhadra* implies one's karmic readiness. This view is indeed mentioned in rGod ldem's anthology. *Supporting Notes on the Liberation Through Wearing* states that one has to have accumulated merit for eons to come across the teachings of the cycle.²⁸ Nevertheless, the liberating power of blessings in the sacred letters is conspicuous because what is promised is not merely a good rebirth or vast amounts of merit, but the unsurpassable enlightenment itself; and this status is assured even for a bird or deer who wears the amulet or hears the tantras recited.²⁹

4. Cosmogonic origins

That enlightenment is attainable in this way and possible even for animals highlights the tremendous blessing power of the *Liberation Through Wearing* texts. Where does the liberating power of the scriptures and amulets come from? It originates from the primordial manifestations of wisdom arising in the first moments of cosmogonic play. Although seeing and hearing are less important venues for transmitting the blessings of the sacred tantras, these senses have a crucial role in the cosmogonic narratives that relate the source of the liberating power of the amulets and tantras. The cosmogonic narratives in rGod ldem's anthology describe the initial manifestation of appearances (*gzhi snang*) from the empty, indeterminate universal ground (*kun gzhi*).³⁰ The first being to emerge, Samantabhadra, sees these visions of brilliant luminous displays and hears roaring sounds. Without fear or grasping, he recognizes the sensory manifestations as a self-display not external to himself, and attains enlightenment.

²⁸ *Supporting Notes on the Liberation through Wearing of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection: Notes on the Key Points That Unravel the Secret Key Points* (Yang gsang bla na med pa'i rdzogs pa chen po'i btags grol rgyab yig gsang ba'i gnad bkrol gnad kyi yi ge'i them yig rnam) UR III: 256.

²⁹ *The Tantra of the Single Son of all the Buddhas (the Liberation Through Wearing Cycle)* (Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig pu'i rgyud: btags grol skor) UR III: 213, 215.

³⁰ In rGod ldem's anthology, the primordial ground of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is usually called the universal ground (*kun gzhi*), while in many other rDzogs chen texts such as Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings* it is called the ground (*gzhi*) and the universal ground refers to the universal ground consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*) or the individual ground of karmic imprints in each sentient being.

In addition to the standard cosmogonic stories, rGod ldem's anthology contains two distinctive narratives in the *Liberation Through Wearing* cycle. The first one, *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing*, has a notable emphasis (despite its title) on the sense of hearing in the awakening of the Primordial Buddha. In this narrative, Samantabhadra hears roaring, thundering sounds and sees dark, shaking visual appearances similar to the terrifying sounds and lights in the *bardo*. However, he has no fear of the sounds or lights, but maintains naked awareness "embracing the essence of sound,"³¹ which causes the auditory manifestations to be recognized as the self-arisen, primordial sounds: 'a, a, sha, sa, ma, ha. These six syllables, symbolize the natural state in *rDzogs chen*, are the same ones given to people to concentrate on due to their power to clear the mind.³²

Samantabhadra's enlightenment is significant in the context of *Liberation Through Wearing* for three reasons. It is the first instance of the *rDzogs chen* idea of spontaneous liberation, a liberation through mere recognition, which underlies the concept of attaining enlightenment automatically through wearing amulets, regardless of intelligence and karmic standing. Samantabhadra's enlightenment is also the first occasion of liberation through seeing and hearing, although the senses here work as instruments, not the main cause of liberation as with liberatory tantras. In cosmogonic manifestation, Samantabhadra sees and hears the visions, but it is the recognition that brings about enlightenment. The relationship of the recognition as the cause and senses as instruments is similar to the link between cause (*rgyu*) and condition (*rkyen*) in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. In contrast, when a person lays his eyes on a liberatory tantra or hears it recited, it is the very act of sensory perception that has a liberating effect, although it draws its power from the cosmogonic connection and Samantabhadra's primordial recognition. Thirdly, Samantabhadra's enlightenment is significant because it is directly related to the emergence of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras, as they are literally said to arise out of the cosmogonic play.

The appearance of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras is explained in another cosmogonic narrative distinctive to rGod ldem's anthology, *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra: The Way the Liberation Through Wearing Emerges*. This text connects the origin of the *Liberation Through Wearing* to the primordial manifestation of sacred sounds from enlightened deities. After Samantabhadra attains

³¹ *sGra'i snying po dril bas*: (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po mthong grol rin po che*) UR III: 275.

³² *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po mthong grol rin po che*, UR III: 275–276. For a more detailed explanation of cosmogony in *The Unimpeded Realization*, see Turpeinen 2018: 141–144.

enlightenment, he emanates the peaceful and wrathful deities. Self-resounding sound arises from their enlightened bodies in the form of the syllables Om̐, Āḥ and Hūm̐. Other letters arise from the three syllables, and twenty-one *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras manifest from Vajradhara's enlightened mind.³³

These two distinctive cosmogonic narratives, *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing* and *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra*, explain the extraordinary power of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras. *The Precious Liberation Through Seeing* narrates Samantabhadra's enlightenment in connection to sacred sounds or letters, the building blocks of scriptures. The theme of sacred sounds continues in *The Pith Instruction of the Glorious Samantabhadra* which dates the emergence of the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras all the way back to the primordial moments of cosmogony when the first sounds emanated out of Samantabhadra's manifestations. The tantras arose from the enlightened mind of Vajradhara who is said to be Samantabhadra's emanation, so they are a projection of Samantabhadra's primordial recognition infused with his blessings and compassionate intention to help future sentient beings. Endowed with such power, the *Liberation Through Wearing* tantras can enlighten living beings merely upon being worn, seen, or heard. In addition, the liberation through visual and auditory perceptions is analogous to Samantabhadra's liberation upon seeing and hearing the primordial play of sounds and forms. This analogy is intentionally evoked by the cosmogonic narratives in rGod Idem's anthology in order to explain the liberatory power of the scriptures contained in the amulets.

5. Conclusion

The examination of the senses in the practice of direct transcendence and liberation through wearing has illustrated the close connection between these two practices. Not only do both practices apply the senses as instruments for liberation, but they are also philosophically grounded in the possibility of spontaneous liberation as exemplified in Samantabhadra's recognition of the cosmogonic visions and sounds as self-display. Direct transcendence describes a venue of non-dual perception based on an alternative wisdom network of seeing, while liberation through wearing incarnates this possibility of spontaneous liberation by turning it into sacred material culture in the form of amulets and scriptures accessible through sight, hearing, and touch.

³³ *dPal kun tu bzang po'i man ngag: btags grol byon tshul*, UR III:205–208.

The role of the senses in the practices of direct transcendence and liberation through wearing illustrates the radically different view on sensory perception in the Tibetan *rDzogs chen* and the Indian philosophical schools of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. While these philosophical schools generally view sensory perception as tainted by dualism and perpetuating the illusion of ordinary existence, the *rDzogs chen* tradition utilizes various senses as tools to attain enlightenment. The *rDzogs chen* view celebrates the liberatory possibilities of sensory perception and carefully undergirds these possibilities in creative philosophical ideas, alternative physiological structures, and narratives of Samantabhadra's enlightenment in the first moments of cosmogony.

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The Ceremony for Imbibing the Siddhis, with particular reference to examples from Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*¹

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In Buddhist tantric practice, the attainment of siddhis (Tib. *ngos grub*) is synonymous with spiritual accomplishment, classified into the two aspects of common siddhis, indicating the mastery of worldly phenomena—such as clairvoyance, the ability to walk at super-human pace, to fly, or to pass through solid barriers, etc.—and the supreme siddhi of enlightenment. Thus, a siddha (Tib. *grub thob*) is a realised tantric master. Accounts of hermit yogis may sometimes give the impression of the tantric path and the attainment of siddhis more or less purely as a matter of individual mental discipline, perhaps combined with some component of yogic exercises, even though at least the common attainments clearly suggest a physical as well as mental transformation. But when we examine Tibetan tantric practice, it can be seen that this perspective on siddhis tells us only part of the story. For Tibetan tantric practice requires outer physical transmission and bestowal of siddhis as well as inner cultivation. Moreover, the practice is not confined to virtuoso meditators, and tantric *sādhana*s are not only performed in retreat environments. They are also practised communally in elaborate ritual ceremonies involving a complex division of labour, such that all participants, including those who may know or understand little of the techniques of visualisation and meditation, are able to share in the spiritual accomplishments through a sensual

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg in the Center for Religious Studies at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum during my fellowship year (2015–2016), which enabled me to write this paper, and to present it at IATS Bergen. Thanks are due to Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin of Sarnath, who read the texts discussed here with me, and helped to answer my many questions. Illustrative photographs are from a Major Practice Session at Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan (2013), and I would like also to thank Lama Kunzang Dorjee, Lopon Lhundrup Namgyal, and the other lamas and practitioners there. Figs 4–6 and 13–16 are copyright Nicolas Chong (the other photos are by Cathy Cantwell). Any errors remain my own.

engagement in the event—watching, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting, as may be appropriate at various points in the ritual. A central ritual performance in such events is always the ceremony for *Imbibing the Siddhis* (*dnegos grub blang ba*), in which the spiritual attainments are activated within the person through being transmitted by physical contact with and by ingesting siddhi substances (*dnegos grub kyi yo byad* or *dnegos grub kyi rdzas*). There are two main occasions for *Imbibing the Siddhis* in a typical tantric ritual performance in the rNying ma tradition, in which practice is based on the three inner tantras, with an emphasis on Mahāyoga.



Figs 1-3: Medicinal Cordial offering (*sman mchod*). Above: Offering to the tantric deities. Below: Imbibing the *Siddhis*. Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan, 2013.

Firstly, siddhi substances may be ingested by the tantric practitioner—or by the principal lama in the case of a communal ritual—in the final section of the *Medicinal Cordial Offering* (*sman mchod*), in which consecrated elixir is offered to the tantric deities. Usually, the cordial is offered to the lineage masters and the various deities in turn, with verses of recitation and the flicking of a little liquid each time. Then at the end, the practitioner, visualised as the

deity, takes up some cordial between the thumb and third finger, and imbibes the siddhis by placing it on his/her forehead, throat and heart (respectively the body, speech, and mind centres), finally tasting some on the tongue and ingesting the elixir.

The second occasion which will be focused on here is at the climax of the whole ritual, when the *Imbibing* ceremony includes the consecrations of the various ritual articles, as well as siddhi foods and liquids to consume. On this occasion, the principal lama first imbibes the siddhis himself/herself, and then bestows them on the rest of the congregation. During a single day practice session, the siddhis ceremony will take place generally in the late afternoon, following all the main practice sections apart from the concluding dedications and aspirations and so forth. During a Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), and also an individual retreat, the siddhis ceremony is not performed in the same way as most of the other sections, which are repeated on a daily basis. Rather, it is scheduled only for the final day of the ritual, when the practice commences in the early hours of the morning and is performed in full, so that the auspicious imbibing of the siddhis can take place at the end of the practice, just as the sun is rising.

Those familiar with communal ritual gatherings in Tibetan communities will know that it is not only the tantric practitioners and others present throughout the whole practice session who will attend the siddhis ceremony. Many others may attend, both from the local community and beyond, and in the case of a Major Practice Session, the numbers can run into thousands, assembled often for hours, seated in the area outside the temple, awaiting the consecrations (*byin rlabs*). When there are large numbers, just as in the case of a tantric empowerment ceremony which involves a similar ritual bestowal upon everyone present, there may be too many items for the lama personally to bestow them all. He will therefore first bestow the siddhis upon a select group of senior lamas, and they will help in further bestowing the various articles and consumables on everyone else.



Figs 4-6. Final Day: Imbibing the *Siddhis* (tantric attainments), Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013. Above: lamas in front of the Head Lama, holding the sacred maṇḍala items. Above left: the young *sprul sku* (recognised reincarnation of the previous Head Lama) offering the Head Lama the flask, and below right, taking the flask consecration.

Either the congregation will file up to the front and receive the items in turn from the line of lamas, or the lamas will form a procession, and progress first around the rows in the temple, and then along the rows of those seated outside. It is not uncommon to witness a certain amount of excitement and chaos as people crowd around to receive their share—and often a further share of consecrated pills etc. which they can give to relatives and friends unable to attend. It is important to appreciate that this type of apparently superficial involvement is not a lay or folk distortion of some “higher” or more spiritual reality accessed only by the meditation masters. Nor does it merely represent a service by the lamas for the laity, in which blessings can be transmitted.² For these physical bestowals are a necessary and

² In these comments, I am not so much responding to previous scholarly analyses of the relations between monastics and laity in Buddhism, but rather to popular

integral part of the tantric practice, crucial for all those actively participating. It is not expected that the attendees on the fringes of the event will gain spiritual accomplishment as a result of the bestowals upon them, yet substantial benefits such as increased longevity may be anticipated for all. There is even the possibility that a person with faith, coupled with the appropriate karmic connections, could achieve some spiritual insight as a direct consequence of the blessings conferred.³



Figs 7 & 8. Imbibing the *Siddhis*: Procession for the distribution of the consecrations to everyone attending, Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013.

over-simplifications common amongst those studying Buddhism in Asia without the cultural immersion which engenders appreciation of its full context.

³ Here and below, in commenting on understandings of the practices, besides textual sources, I base myself on numerous discussions over many years with rNying ma practitioners, as well as fieldwork, especially with the Jangsa community in Kalimpong, India (2009) and Gelegphu, Bhutan (2013); see footnote 1. I am especially indebted to Lopon P. Ogyan Tenzin, who acted as lama consultant on a research project at the University of Cardiff, *Longevity Practices and Concepts in Tibet* (2006–2009); and on a research project based at the University of Oxford's Oriental Institute (2010–2015), *Authorship, originality and innovation in Tibetan Scriptural Revelations: A case study from the Dudjom Corpus*. Both of these projects were funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). During my Käte Hamburger Kolleg funded fellowship at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, I had the opportunity to spend a further month with Lopon P. Ogyan Tenzin in Sarnath, where we read together the texts discussed in this article. Also crucial have been discussions with the Head Lama of the Jangsa community, Lama Kunzang Dorjee. My approach has therefore been specifically informed by rNying ma Mahāyoga perspectives, and I do not claim that it necessarily reflects Tibetan Buddhism as a whole. Nonetheless, I think that the points made here about the engagement of the senses in Tibetan tantric rituals are quite likely to be more broadly applicable.

The point is that the sensual dimension of the experience, and above all, the physical incorporation of the siddhi substances into the person, has a substantial impact on the body-mind complex. Indeed, the connotations of the Tibetan equivalent term for siddhis reflect this aspect of embodied attainment. The term *dnegos grub* means the accomplishment (*grub*) of actual reality (*dnegos*). This implies spiritual realisation, but *dnegos* can also be taken to mean substantial, concrete or material existence. It seems that both senses are combined or implicit in the concept. And this is not simply an etymological derivation of the word—on the contrary, the notion that to imbibe *dnegos grub* or siddhis it is necessary for the spiritual understanding to be reflected outwardly and fully actualised or sealed by a physical transmission is fundamental to the concept in Tibetan tantric understandings. There is a well-known account which demonstrates this, concerning the eighth century Indian master Buddhaguhya (Sangs rgyas gsang ba), who is said to have been a key lineage master for the Mahāyoga transmission in Tibet, especially for the *rGyud gsang ba snying po* (**Guhyagarbhatantra*). According to the version in Dudjom Rinpoche's Dharma history (*chos 'byung*, Dudjom Rinpoche *Collected Works*, vol. Ka: 88; 1991: 465), Buddhaguhya was performing practice on the deity Mañjuśrī when he saw signs on his altar: the painting of Mañjuśrī smiled, the siddhi liquid of ghee was boiling, and the old flowers began to bloom again. He understood that these were indications of his accomplishment of siddhi, but he hesitated, uncertain whether he should reach for the flowers or the ghee first. This hesitation acted as a hindrance; a *yakṣiṇī* (female spirit) slapped him and he momentarily fainted. When he recovered consciousness, the picture was covered in dust, the flowers had wilted, and the ghee had boiled over. Nonetheless, he still cleaned the dust from the painting, put the flowers on his head, and drank what was left of the ghee. Thus, his body became free from any disease, his intellect sharp, and he mastered supernormal powers. In the extended version frequently repeated by Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin, his failure to imbibe the siddhis when they were fresh limited his spiritual accomplishment, and this was why he later had to perform further extensive practice.

In this tantric tradition then, what happens outwardly is important for the spiritual attainment, and not only symbolic or reflective of it. Thus, in the Major Practice Session, the siddhis should be taken when the sun is rising, and in the case of an individual retreatant, the siddhis should be imbibed when they have arisen in their symbolic supports, and are still fresh. In some tantric sādhanas, rather than placing the section on imbibing the siddhis near the end, where it would generally be performed, the section may be placed

earlier in the text, following the mantra recitation section. It was explained to me that this is because of the need to have the verses ready to hand in case the signs of the siddhis should arise when one is performing an individual practice or retreat. Then, the siddhis should be imbibed immediately, and the retreat is concluded, however much time may remain from the originally scheduled retreat, or however many mantras may be outstanding from the set number.

I have not explored the early history of Major Practice Sessions in any detail, but it is clear that the tradition was thoroughly developed by the thirteenth century, when Gu ru Chos dbang (Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212–1270) composed or compiled an elaborate ritual manual for a Major Practice Session for his *Eightfold Buddha Word* (*bka' brgyad*) cycle, which has all the main components of the rites still performed today, and includes some recitations which are precisely the same in contemporary rNying ma practice. Less elaborated precedents of such manuals for Major Practice Sessions are found in the *Eightfold Buddha Word* (*bka' brgyad*) corpus of Gu ru Chos dbang's predecessor, the twelfth century Nyang ral (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192). Nyang ral's presentation of tantric ritual was seminal for the early rNying ma pa, and rituals based on his *Eightfold Buddha Word* revelation are still performed today. Although the manuals considered here do not quite fit the genre of "Ritual Practice Framework texts for the Major Practice Session" (*sgrub chen gyi khog dbub* or *sgrub khog* in short), there are some specifying extended practice sessions lasting many days, which contain key elements of the practice structure. I would like briefly to introduce two of these, and their rituals for imbibing siddhis.

First, it is worth raising the knotty problem of the extent to which the extant versions of these texts reflect their twelfth century counterparts. Indeed, in his study of Nyang ral, Daniel Hirshberg (2016: 100–101) points out that an early account of the *Eightfold Buddha Word* revelation speaks of seven small volumes, where now in the longer editions, we have thirteen large volumes. Clearly, the earlier texts have been expanded, although without a full-scale philological analysis of the sources, which is beyond the remit of this paper, it is hard to say where the elaborations have taken place.⁴ That

⁴ Some texts by later lineage masters have been added, and are clearly marked. In the root tantra sections, additions are also clear, since there are numerous annotations in small writing, not present in the versions of those tantras transmitted within the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* collections, and greatly expanding the length of those texts. These are clearly later elaborations which were established within the transmission of the corpus, and interesting in illustrating how these tantras have been understood by the tradition. But elsewhere in the

said, it is also clear that Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang were seminal in the creation of the template for what became the system of rNying ma practice, and there is a distinction between the root revelatory texts and the later practice compilations of the materials, which often integrate many other sources.⁵ Here, I have restricted my analysis to the texts presented as root revelation, which surely in their essentials can be attributed to Nyang ral—and may in parts at least represent even older tantric materials.⁶ I have primarily used the versions within the thirteen volume mTshams brag edition, and give the pagination for that edition here, while consulting the parallel texts in other collections for comparison. A brief perusal of these specific texts would suggest that the main variants are minor spelling variations, and different punctuation, with occasional small differences (see, for instance, note 8 below), but nothing which would suggest variant readings of such magnitude as to differ from the meanings of the summarised content of the mTshams brag texts presented for the purpose of this article.

The first work under discussion is a commentarial text on the two sections of the Approach or Familiarisation practice, along with the following Accomplishment (*bsnyen bsgrub*). Some of the instructions could apply equally well for an individual retreat, although it is clear that the context for this text is communal ritual. The long list of ritual items (Volume 8: 258–260) might be challenging for a retreatant to gather, and there is a discussion on gathering the perfect circle of practitioners, each with different qualities and functions (253–257). There is also one section, found always in Major Practice Sessions, for allocating the different roles and installing the various practitioners in their seats (290–292), and a further section, also a feature of Major Practice Sessions, on integrating new students (300–303).

This text is especially interesting in relation to the ritual of imbibing the siddhis, since it dedicates about seventeen percent of the entire text to the subject of the siddhis.⁷ This discussion opens

current versions, additions and editorial amendments are not marked in any such fashion.

⁵ For example, the two volume 1971 New Delhi publication (TBRC W00KG09391) of manuscripts from the Kathok Ontrul Rimpoche represents practice texts used at Kah thog (Volume 1: Preface), and includes compilations from many later sources, such as works by the seventeenth century founder of sMin grol gling, gTer bdag gling pa (1646–1714).

⁶ In a current project at the University of Bochum focused on a different section of the *Eightfold Buddha Word* cycle, I am examining Nyang ral's re-presentation as part of his revelation of a tantric text on the *Phur pa* deity which is found amongst the Dunhuang materials.

⁷ Essentially, discussion of siddhis begins p.328, with the section on the signs of siddhi. Following this, the section on imbibing the siddhis begins on p.330 and

with an extended list of the signs of siddhis (328–330), classifying them into such categories as best, middling, and inferior; and outer, inner, and secret. This section concludes by instructing that if the signs arise, one should engage in the ritual of imbibing siddhis (*dngos grub blang ba'i las la 'jug par bya'o*). The section on imbibing siddhis is divided into three parts, the first on benefitting the practitioners themselves, the second on empowering others, and the third on the final rituals. Frequently, a Major Practice Session is concluded with an empowerment, but here, I consider only the first section.

In preparation for the ritual, the yogis are instructed to clean themselves and dress well, and to develop stable faith in the siddhis. The substances which support the siddhis (*dngos grub gyi rten rdzas*) are to be laid out. These include alcoholic elixir (*bdud rtsi 'dza gad*) filling a skull-cup which has appropriate positive characteristics, and various types of foods and drinks.⁸



Fig 9. Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) for Siddhis, connected with the four ritual actions, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013.

runs to the end of the text, although not all of the content directly addresses the actual absorption of siddhis. The final part, for instance, details the closing rituals. Nonetheless, there is a substantial focus on the siddhis, to the extent even of including such apparently separate rituals within the remit of imbibing the siddhis.

⁸ The text lists: "Offer in vessels various types of foods and drinks, Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) of the four ritual actions, *mamsa*, butter, sweet cream cheese, cooked rice, pastries, yoghurt, sweets, various fruits, alcoholic beverages. Place them on the maṇḍala." (*zhi rgyas dbang drag bzhi' 'brang rgyas dang: mamsa dang/ mar dang/ thud dang/ 'bras chan dang/ 'khur ba dang/ zho dang/ la du dang/ shing thog sna tshogs pa dang: su ra la sogs pa bza' btung gi bye brag sna tshogs snod du stsal te: dkyil 'khor la bgod do.*, 331) Here, instead of alcoholic beverages (*su ra*), the Kaḥ thog version of the text (1978 Text 1: 167.5) gives raw sugar (*bu ram*), and also 167.6 *dgod* rather than the probable misspelling, *bgod*.

The Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) of the four ritual actions receive a prominent mention. Different torma type structures are known as *'brang rgyas* in Tibetan ritual. In rNying ma contexts, the main two types are a vase shaped metallic torma for longevity (*tshe 'brang*), and *'brang rgyas* for siddhis, as we have here. In contemporary practice, these tormas feature the three-fold jewel design. As well as the many dough tormas, which are the centrepiece of the plates of siddhi foods to be distributed, a clay version of five *tormas* may be installed within the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* for the duration of the Major Practice Session as one of the sacred *maṇḍala* items. The central one is surrounded by four smaller ones of appropriate colour, each associated with one of the four ritual actions.

Having expelled the obstacles which may hinder the arising of siddhis, there is a recitation for absorbing the siddhis, which details a visualisation of the substances offered, including conjuring up the image of the sounds of music and smoke of incense, as the offerings are consecrated as elixir. Through the union of the male and female wisdom deities, red light rays radiate, purifying all beings, penetrating the sugatas, such that buddha body, speech, mind, qualities, and actions return and are absorbed. The elixir substances are visualised pooling as the stainless elixir of immortality. There are further offerings and mantras, with requests for the bestowal of siddhis, and the rakta and medicinal cordial are offered. Here, with the thumb and third finger, the rakta is placed on the three bodily centres as the body, speech, and mind siddhis. After further recitations accompanied with similar visualisations, the male and female wisdom deities are visualised as uniting and disintegrating into light, which dissolves into the foods and elixir liquids.

With this, the yogis eat and drink a select portion of siddhi substances, meditating on non-dual bliss, and the accomplishment of the vajra nature of all the sugatas' bodies, speech, and mind. In this context, no mention is made of transmitting the blessings to the larger assembly, but it could be that the implication is that this would occur with the empowerment which follows, constituting the section on benefitting others through the imbibing of siddhis.⁹

⁹ A bestowal upon the students of the foods and kapala liquids is described (340-341).



Fig 10 Final Day: Imbibing the *Siddhis*: Prepared plates of siddhi foods beside the maṇḍala, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013. Note that each individual bowl has one of the Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) for Siddhis, made out of an edible dough mix.

The second text I consider here is the second of a series of three apparently related texts (Volume 8: 347–507) relating to Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*). The first gives meditation and visualisation instructions on this inner tantric tradition of the Elixir qualities (*bdud rtsi'i yon tan*) class, focusing on *Che mchog* heruka as the central deity. The second and third texts have somewhat overlapping content, both dealing with the ritual instructions for the practice, but the second text has a more sustained focus on how to arrange and deal with the substances. As in contemporary rNying ma practice, this Medicinal Accomplishment is to be integrated with or practised as an intensive communal practice lasting several days.¹⁰ It seems also to have the same structure as present day Medicinal Accomplishment rituals (379; 397–402), divided into the first days consecrating the unground medicinal pieces, which are ground and made into medicinal pills roughly half-way through the practice session, so that the remainder of the days concentrates on the compounded medicinal pills, installed within an “elixir palace” (*bdud rtsi pho brang*).¹¹

There is a long list of ingredients (381–388), which are classified in a complex manner, with groups of “kings” and “ministers” of the

¹⁰ For an illustrated description of such a Medicinal Accomplishment practice, see Cantwell 2015.

¹¹ A parallel notion in Dudjom Rinpoche's Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*) text for the *Meteoric Iron Razor* is that of the Medicinal mansion (*smān khang*), Volume Tha: 313.

senses, medicines, smells, and incense; as well as many other substances, explained in detail, with each positioned in a specific part of the *maṇḍala* structure. The ritual practice is outlined, and this is followed by a section on the signs of success (414–416), which feature a number of “naturally arising” phenomena around the elixir substances, such as fragrances which should be deeply inhaled, smoke patterns in the form of the ritual implements, which should be absorbed by placing them upon the crown of the head with hand *mudrās*, and sounds caught in the *vajra* fist, transferred through the fingers to the elixir liquid, which is then tasted on the tongue. Once signs have arisen, there is a visualisation (416–417) for elixir streaming down from the deities in union, pooling in the skull-cup vessels on the *maṇḍala*. Mantras are to be recited and the *maṇḍala* circumambulated. The siddhis are then secured (*dingos grub dbang du bsdu ba*) through a further meditation on Hayagrīva above the medicinal palace, and other wisdom deities being invited and descending onto thrones (217–418). Then, with mantras and further visualisations, again, the *maṇḍala* is circumambulated, and the siddhis are imbibed (418).

The following text, which is the third of the set, gives various recitations for the imbibing siddhis and empowerment section (498–505), some of which seem to be complementary to the ritual instruction in the second text. The opening of the lid of the (medicinal) elixir container is mentioned (501), as well as the placement of a precious vessel with a mix of the elixir pills and other items either on top of the heads of the practitioners (*mched rnams*) or against their throats (505).



Fig 11 & 12. A medicinal container beneath the *siddhis* canopy, opened on the right, Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), incorporating a Medicinal Accomplishment (*sman sgrub*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013.

Later ritual texts are sometimes rather more detailed in their descriptions of the bodily and sensual aspects of the imbibing or bestowal of siddhis. They may also more explicitly include in the list of siddhi granting materials to be touched to the body, the practice supports (*sgrub rten*), or the various sacred items installed for the whole session within the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* (Dudjom Rinpoche Volume Tha, *sgrub khog*: 267). In the texts of Nyang ral's considered here, the edible and drinkable siddhi substances are highlighted, including the medicinal pills in the Medicinal Accomplishment texts, and the other ritual articles are referred to only within the Empowerment section rather than in the Siddhis sections. Having said that, contemporary texts do not always include explicit reference to all items which are in practice treated as siddhi bestowing materials. Moreover, it is clear that Nyang ral's corpus already contains manuals and commentarial texts which present versions of Major Practice Session and Medicinal Accomplishment rituals very much in line with today's monastic practice. There is enough here to be confident that the contemporary tradition's emphasis on the sensory experience of imbibing siddhis has a long heritage.

In conclusion, even the attainment of the highest spiritual goal in this religious system is integrally connected with and is expressed within an embodied sensual experience. As Dudjom Rinpoche explains in a discussion of how tantric longevity rituals work, "*outer and inner causal links are in step with each other, and outer appearances are the natural form of one's own mind*".¹²



Figs 13-16. Head Lama bestowing consecrations: Above and below left, the flask consecrations, and below right, consecration with the *phur bu* (ritual dagger, representing the tantric deity)

¹² *phyi nang rten 'brel gyi 'gros gcig cing snang ba sems kyi rang gzugs yin pa*, Dudjom Rinpoche Volume Pha: 459.

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Unicorns, myrobalans, and eyes: senses in ritual structure and matter in g.Yung drung Bon, a Tibetan tantric tradition

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ibetan ritual is omnipresent in the religious and social lives of Tibetan communities, whether they be on the Tibetan Plateau or in the Himalayas. Some rituals can be very short and happen within minutes, others extend for days and weeks. Some rituals hail from and are practiced in lay spaces by lay practitioners, whereas others have developed in monastic institutions and are principally performed by the religious elites educated in them.

Apart from their undisputably multifaceted value in society and people's lives, the diversity of rituals also shares the fact that they follow a certain internal logic in terms of their own structure and organisation. This feature becomes more apparent in more complex rituals which typically, although by no means exclusively, are also more extensive and come from monastic settings. Rituals acquire various schemes of organisation, according to which ritual action is arranged into parts and sequences following a certain given order. The schemes of organisation are in many instances based on certain imaginary, as for instance an animal body (as in the case of deer in lay, non-monastic, ritual described by Ramble 2013). Very common schemes are numerical sets, such as of three, five, eight, nine, twelve, thirteen, one hundred, etc., often, again, reflecting certain visual images. Among them, the most widespread is the well-known fivefold organisational principle of a *maṇḍala* (*dkyil 'khor*). A *maṇḍala* is a two- or three-dimensional visual representation of the cosmos (and other entities and concepts), revealing its structure as having five main components of the five cardinal points: the Centre and the four quarters of the compass—East, North, West, South (in the Bon po order, see below; cf. Tucci 1969, Snellgrove 1987, Martin 1994, Brauen 1997, Guenther 1999). The maṇḍalic framework has found its way into Tibet from India as an inherent part of the spread of Buddhist tantric teachings, and is frequent in both the different schools of Tibetan

Buddhism and g.Yung drung Bon (see below). It appears in numerous ritual and meditative practices, and figures as a prominent feature in iconography as well as architecture.

The different schemes of the organisation of ritual are apparent in diverse aspects. Various concepts and phenomena crucial for ritual action are inserted into them, either symbolically or physically, such as for instance clusters of divinities, the elements (earth, wind, fire, water), colours, symbols, and so forth. These concepts and phenomena are expressed in ritual practice—visualised in meditations, uttered in recitations, evoked by music and melodies, and materially signified by ritual paraphernalia. As such they can also be smelled, tasted and digested. The five senses thus inevitably play out in the production, adoption and appreciation of ritual practice, regardless of the ritual practice having a certain scheme of organisation or not (cf. Gentry 2017). Yet, the senses can also significantly contribute to the organisational schemes of rituals. This article presents such a case, showing also that the five senses of the human body can be employed as an organisational principle in Tibetan ritual within a maṇḍalic framework, and in the physical composition of ritual objects. The study illustrates an example of the practical application and materialisation of theoretical schemes based on the senses utilised in ritual practice.

The ritual presented here stems from the Bon po monastic tradition known as g.Yung drung Bon ('Eternal Bon', cf. Snellgrove 1967, Kværne 1995, Karmay and Watt 2007), which crystalized in its centres in Central Tibet since about the 11th century CE onwards (Karmay 2007). The g.Yung drung Bon denomination has until now maintained a distinct identity from their Buddhist counterparts (called *chos pa, ban de*). The Bon pos venerate their own founding figure g.Shen rab mi bo, who supposedly preceded the Buddha and Buddhism by a long span of time. Bon has its own recognised religious masters, distinct scriptures, ritual practice, iconography, et cetera. Nonetheless, g.Yung drung Bon also shares so many significant features with Buddhism that it is often counted by contemporary academics among the traditions of Tibetan tantric Buddhism (Kværne 1995: 9–23, Martin 2001: 208–219). Indeed, features and practices adopted by the Bon pos, adherents of Bon, include extensive tantric practices and rituals typical of Tibetan tantric Buddhism and rites of Indian origin.

The focus of this article is one such rite that Bon pos hold in common with Buddhists in Tibet: the rite of 'medical accomplishment', *sman sgrub*. In its elaborated and extended form, *sman sgrub* represents an important celebration in the ritual and social life of the leading monasteries of Bon: bKra shis sman ri and g.Yung drung gling in Central Tibet, and the new sMan ri and Khri brtan nor bu rtse in the

Indian and Nepali Tibetan exile communities, respectively (Sehnalova 2017, 2018).¹ Such a *sman sgrub* performance is centred around the production of a consecrated substance ascribed miraculous properties and usually called simply 'medicine', *sman*. The *sman sgrub* thus represents an "object-oriented" or "object-centered" rite (as indicated by Gentry 2017: 7), in which the *materia sacra* is believed to be of crucial potency and significance to the ritual undertaking as such. The *sman sgrub* medicine is not only a ritual sensory and material object *per se* (cf. Gentry 2017: 7–8) with which the performers and recipients of the ritual interact, but itself is also materially composed following the understanding of the human senses in Buddhism and its Tibetan variation existing also in g.Yung drung Bon, as well as in the Tibetan medical gSo ba rig pa tradition. The study is based on fieldwork carried out during a *sman sgrub* performance and on textual analysis of ritual scriptures used throughout the rite. The performance observed took place in the Bon po exile monastery of Khri brtan nor bu rtse situated on the western edge of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal in December 2012.² An essential part of the study was also to work with the gSo ba rig pa practitioner who was responsible for compounding the *sman sgrub* medicine.

1. Bon po sman sgrub ritual

The general appellation '*sman sgrub*' refers to a great variety of ritual practices in different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, including g.Yung drung Bon.³ Within g.Yung drung Bon only, a number of *sman sgrub* rites exist, of which just a few have been developed into and maintained as actually performed practices. The choice of particular *sman sgrub* rites to pursue depended on historical developments and the preferences of individual religious masters and leaders of respective strands of each religious school; i.e., in the case of Bon, it depended on the preferences of the respective Bon ritual lineages.⁴ In general, the various Tibetan *sman sgrub* ceremonies differ in length and amplification, the divinities to which they are dedicated, cycles of tantric practices to which they are linked, occasions and frequencies of

¹ On the monasteries see Karmay and Nagano 2003.

² For a detailed study of the rite see Sehnalova 2013, 2018.

³ A brief overview of the different *sman sgrub* and related practices in Sehnalova 2018: 9–19, 26–28, related bibliography in Sehnalova, 2017, 2018. Cf. Kind 2002, Blaikie 2013, 2014, Blaikie et al. 2015, Cantwell 2015, 2017, Craig 2011, 2012, Garrett 2009, 2010, Gentry 2017: 316–333.

⁴ Sehnalova 2018: 26–27. On the lineages see Karmay 1998, 2007, rMe'u tsha bstan 'dzin nam rgyal 2014.

performance, and of course in the actual enactment. The feature they share in common is that they all are acts of ‘medicinal accomplishment.’ This means that a ritual procedure is conducted to enhance, or ‘accomplish’ (*sgrub*), a certain substance referred to as ‘medicine’ (*sman*). The act of ‘accomplishing’ or ‘attaining’ is a meditative *sādhana* (*sgrubs thabs*) practice during which the ‘medicine’ substance is ‘consecrated’.⁵ The consecration implies a supposed inner transformation of the substance enhancing its properties to comprise special powers. The *sādhana* implies meditative visualisations of divinities with which the performing adept self-identifies, and thereby also undergoes an inner, spiritual transformation. By this process, in both the consecrated substance and the practitioner, qualities leading to awakening (Sanskrit: *bodhi*, Tibetan: *byang chub*), the highest spiritual aim of Buddhism adopted by g.Yung drung Bon, are supposed to be generated. This power and potency are believed to concern not only humans, but extend to all sentient beings (Sanskrit: *sattva*, Tibetan: *sems can*) and the environment as a whole.⁶ The *sman sgrub* medicine, by featuring in the ritual as its important actor and also its prime product, represents a kind of a ritual ‘power object’, defined by Gentry as: “objects believed to have the power, or capacity to exact transformations in the state of being of persons and environments.” (Gentry 2017: 7).

The specific *sman sgrub* ritual under analysis here belongs to longer and elaborated *sman sgrub* practices carried out in a monastic setting by tantric monastic specialists, in this case Bon po monks. In g.Yung drung Bon, two forms of *sman sgrub* have gained pivotal position in the main seat of Bon po religious power and authority, the sMan ri monastery, both in Tibet and in the exile: the *light-swirled sman sgrub* (*sman sgrub 'od zer 'khyil ba*) dedicated to the tutelary deity (Sanskrit: *iṣṭa-devatā*, Tibetan: *yi dam / yi dam gyi lha*)⁷ Khro bo gtso mchog mkha' 'gying,⁸ and secondly the *light-blazed sman sgrub* (*sman sgrub 'o zer 'bar ba*) of the tutelary deity Phur ba (Sanskrit: *Kīla*). According to written historical evidence, it seems that this practice likely started to take shape with the early formation of the Bon tradition in Central Tibet between the 11th and 13th centuries.⁹ The practice then continued in sMan ri which was established in 1405.¹⁰ Here, the performance of the *sman sgrub* has even been listed among the duties of every abbot of the

⁵ Bentor 1996, 1997, Cantwell 2015, 2017.

⁶ Based on the example of *sman sgrub* studied here (Sehnalova 2013, 2018).

⁷ Further in Snellgrove 1987, Cantwell 2015: 91.

⁸ On the deity see Kværne 1995: 75–77, 88–90.

⁹ Sehnalova 2017.

¹⁰ Karmay and Watt 2007.

monastery in its communal charter (*bca' yig*) as an obligatory act of ritual curriculum.¹¹ After the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, the escaping Tibetan refugees carried their ritual practices and institutions into exile in India and Nepal.

In December 2012, Khri brtan nor bu rtse monastery performed the the *sman sgrub* ritual the *light-swirled sman sgrub*. The celebration lasted for fifteen days, and along with other adjoining ritual practices demanded participation of virtually everyone in the monastery, which at that time hosted about two hundred monks. A select group of advanced practitioners was trained by the leading authority of the monastery, Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che (b. 1926, Khyung po, Tibet), to be able to perform the complex task of consecrating the *sman sgrub* medicine. Their recitation resonated uninterrupted for the whole duration of the performance over the fortnight, and was accompanied by hand gestures (Sanskrit: *mudrā*, Tibetan: *phyag rgya*), dancing steps (*zhabs bro*), and embedded in musical melodies (*dbyangs*) specific for the *light-swirled sman sgrub*. The key ritual formula, the *mantra* (*sngags*) of the rite, resounded literally thousands and thousands of times.¹² The event attracted crowds of Bon po pilgrims from the Nepali and Indian Himalayas, as well as from further away.¹³

Throughout the performance, the *sman sgrub* medicine was the focal point of the ritual undertaking, arranged in the centre of the monastery's assembly hall, with the performers seated around it. The medicine rested upon, around, and below a sand *maṇḍala*. All the ritual action centred on the *maṇḍala*, the essential device for the consecration. The *maṇḍala* represented the palace of the deity Khro bo gtso mchog mkha' 'gying and his supernatural entourage, who were invoked to bestow blessings and powers on the medicine to enhance its transformation.¹⁴ Similarly, the practitioners visualised Khro bo gtso mchog mkha' 'gying and his attendants to acquire a level of spiritual realisation through self-identification with them. Through powers transferring from the divinities upon the *maṇḍala* and into the practitioners concentrating on the *maṇḍala* and the medicine, the medicine also supposedly gained these powers. Hereby the medicine was believed to turn into a miraculous substance for diverse usage:

¹¹ Cech 1988.

¹² For a detailed description of the rite and translations of its main texts: Sehnalova 2013, 2017, 2018.

¹³ Apart from the Bon pos, members of other religious groups also took part, see Sehnalova 2018: 101–104.

¹⁴ Four sand *maṇḍala* diagrams were used in total during the performance, their depictions in dPon slob Rin po che tshangs pa bstan 'dzin et al. 2014. The concluding one in Namdak et al. 2000: 101.

healing of ailments and diseases, any mental or physical disorders, protection in the form of amulets, gaining extraordinary faculties, support for a better rebirth and finally awakening, a powerful object of veneration placed on domestic altars, et cetera.¹⁵ The medicine was by the practitioners usually succinctly referred to as ‘medicine’ (*sman*), or more expressively as ‘*sman sgrub* medicine’ (*sman sgrub kyi sman*), or also simply *sman sgrub*.¹⁶ The last term can thus apply to either the whole *sman sgrub* rite or in certain contexts only to its product. In this article, I accordingly use the term ‘medicine’ for the consecrated substance.

The *maṇḍala* served as the main organising principle of the whole ritual and also its consecrated medicine. The fivefold maṇḍalic structure governed the ritual practice: the scriptures were divided into clusters of five;¹⁷ thus also the ritual recitations and invocations based on the scriptures; further patterns and repetitions of melodies hummed, sung, and played by ritual instruments; the practitioners’ visualisations and meditations structured into divisions of fifths; their subsequent ritual acts and usage of ritual paraphernalia; as well as the visual aesthetics of the rite, in which the individual cardinal points of the *maṇḍala* were associated with special directions in the place of the performance.¹⁸ Likewise in the compounding of the medicine, the pattern of the *maṇḍala* acquired the principal role, accompanied by another adjoining pattern of an eightfold format. The medicine was internally arranged based on the *maṇḍala* and then on this second form. In both forms, the five senses informed the pattern.

2. Formula of the *sman sgrub* medicine

First, I would like to present the recipe for compounding the consecrated substance called ‘medicine’ of the Bon po *light-swirled sman sgrub* variety, as it is used by ritual practitioners. Below I offer a translation of the formula extracted from the scriptures of the ritual, concretely found in their main part entitled *The Main Text of the Light-Swirled Nectar Medicine* (*‘Od zer ‘khyil pa bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs lags s+ho*).¹⁹ The formula itself is not recited during the

¹⁵ Kind 2002, Cantwell 2015, 2017, Sehnalova 2013, 2017, 2018.

¹⁶ Other appellations of the medicine in Sehnalova 2017: 145.

¹⁷ See the manuscripts in note 19; translations of selected parts in Millard, Colin and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished, Sehnalova 2018.

¹⁸ Visual documentation of the *maṇḍala* and the whole performance in Sehnalova, forthcoming b.

¹⁹ I found three versions of the text: *‘Od zer ‘khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs lags s+ho* (manuscript used at Triten Norbutse monastery during the *sman sgrub*

performance but is closely studied by the person chosen to assemble the *sman sgrub* medicine. In the celebration observed in Khri brtan nor bu rtse monastery in 2012, it was a young practitioner of the Tibetan medical gSo ba rig pa tradition and also the head teacher of the monastery's medical school, called Am chi Nyi ma (b. 1969, Mustang, Nepal).²⁰ Having received oral instructions from Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che, Am chi Nyi ma relied on his own medical education and pharmacological practice to interpret the recipe, and then put it into practice in mixing the medicine. The translation below is based on his reading of the text.²¹ An analysis of the recipe will follow afterwards. In the translation, I try to deliver its condensed and succinct style, and also graphically indicate the distinct verses of the original. In practice, Am chi Nyi ma had to omit many of the ingredients listed—all human and animal body parts (apart from red lack, see below), and all the ingredients he could not identify. On the other hand, he included great quantities of botanical material, according to every line of the herbal section of the recipe. The medicine produced amounted to almost one tonne(!). For the given *smān sgrub* celebration, Bon po authorities have taken the human and animal matter to be rather symbolic with no need for its actual application (see further below). All the ingredients also serve to structure the practice of producing and consecrating the medicine, which becomes perhaps more evident for those ingredients not actually physically included. Thus, this is the recipe Am chi Nyi ma had to deal with:

performance); 'Od zer 'khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs pa lags sho (dKar ru Grub dbang sprul sku bstan pa'i nyi ma 1998, vol. 168, text 1); 'Od zer 'khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs pa'i dbus phyogs legs sho (dKar ru Grub dbang sprul sku bstan pa'i nyi ma 1998, vol. 230, text 22). A diplomatic edition taking into account all versions in Wylie transcription is in the Appendix. Rendering of some parts of the recipe into English appears in Millard, Colin and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished.

²⁰ By civil name Nyima Gurung. Further on Am chi Nyi ma see Millard 2002, 2015.

²¹ For a detailed analysis of the respective items see Sehnalova 2013, 2018. Detailed identifications of the Tibetan botanical and zoological terms with Latin Genera and species of the Western Linnean scientific binominal system of nomenclature and taxonomy in Sehnalova 2013, 2018, forthcoming a. The Tibetan and Western classificatory systems do not correspond to each other. The identifications here are based on Am chi Nyi ma's understanding (conveyed orally and in his written commentary on the recipe Nyima Gurung 2012). English names are given only where possible. Where not, Latin names are given.

[SECTION A]

[SECTION Ai]

[I. Centre]²²

Testicles and semen of unicorns and others to purify²³ pride in consciousness refers to testicles and semen of all [animals with] undivided hooves, such as dark-coloured, white-eyed unicorns and others.

To purify desire in consciousness refers to various eggs of birds, such as vultures and others.

To purify jealousy in consciousness refers to [various] kinds of flesh and hearts of carnivorous animals, such as hearts of crocodiles and others.

[Ia. Centre]

Join this root medicine with chebulic myrobalan (*a ru ra rnam par rgyal ba*),

belleric myrobalan (*ba ru ra g.yug 'dral*),

emblic myrobalan (*skyu ru ra*), asafoetida (*shing kun*),

the six good [substances],²⁴ and others.

[II. East]

The medicine of *sha chen g.yung drung lta*²⁵ *me long*²⁶ refers to flesh of young virgin girls, human flesh of *gsang ba gal chen phyi*,²⁷ and elephants' heart flesh, and is to purify the ignorance in form.

Purifying anger in form refers to heart flesh of various kinds of carnivorous animals, such as striped tigers and quietly walking foxes and others.

Purifying pride in form refers to heart flesh of various kinds of animals with undivided hooves, such as white-eyed whitish horses and others.

²² Due to a likely corruption of the text, the first two verses were lost. They can be reconstructed based on a 14th century commentary on the *smam sgrub* ritual and text translated in Millard and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished, 7–8. This suggests that the recipe should open with: “sperm of a young white boy with bright eyes” and “of a sengye togal, a kind of lion”.

²³ On the term *gnas su dag pa* literally meaning ‘purify in [its own] place’ or ‘purify in [its own] state’ see further below.

²⁴ Am chi Nyi ma included kaolin, saffron, safflower, clove, nutmeg, cardamom, and greater (or black) cardamom. Further see Sehnalova 2018: 191-193, forthcoming a. Corrected from *rta*, see the original in the Appendix.

²⁵ Appellation of the particular part of the medicine, see below.

²⁷ The unclear expression to Am chi Nyi ma. Literally can be rendered as ‘the outer secret and important, probably denotes a “certain part of heart” (Millard and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished, 8).

The medicine purifying jealousy in form refers to heart flesh of carnivorous animals living in water, such as otters, good tadpoles; and this is the particular pure root medicine of the East.

[III. North]

The medicine of *dri chen kun 'byung mnyam pa*²⁸ refers to: In order to purify pride in volitions, stool of all animals with undivided hooves dropped while running, such as dark coloured turquoise-maned mares and others [is needed].

In order to purify hatred in volitions, stool of various kinds of carnivorous animals, such as blue swamp lions and wolves, and of *dpyid tshugs dpung*²⁹ [is needed].

In order to purify ignorance in volitions, droppings of [animals with] divided hooves, such as white sheep with a spot on the flank, white-eyed white yaks and others [are needed].

In order to purify desire in volitions, stool of various kinds of birds, such as red-crested white birds, cuckoos with harmonious voice and others [is needed].

In order to purify jealousy in volitions, stool of carnivorous animals, such as jackals and cats striped like tigers [is needed].

[IV. West]

[The medicine of] *khrag ni pad ma sor rtogs*³⁰ refers to: In order to purify anger in sensation, blood of boys and girls with shining red complexion [is needed].

In order to purify desire in sensation, blood of red birds, such as red *mkha' lding*³¹ [is needed].

In order to purify ignorance in sensation, blood of [animals with] divided hooves, such as yellow-headed sheep and others [is needed].

In order to purify pride in sensation, blood of [animals with] undivided hooves, such as vermillion horses with white heels and others [is needed].

In order to purify jealousy in sensation, blood of various kinds of carnivorous animals, such as quietly walking foxes and others, is requested.

²⁸ Appellation of the particular unit of the medicine, see below.

²⁹ An unclear term, according to Am chi Nyi ma likely referring to a carnivorous animal.

³⁰ Appellation of the particular unit of the medicine, see below.

³¹ A bird appellation which can denote multiple Genera and species in the Linnean taxonomy, according to Am chi Nyi ma. See the discussion in Sehnalova 2018: 188–189.

[V. South]

[The medicine of] *dri chu las drug bya ba nan tan*³² refers to urine of glorious brown boys in the South, urine of radiating blue women, and of carnivorous animals with claws, such as dragons *kyus*³³.

In order to purify ignorance in perception, urine of [animals with] divided hooves, such as blue water *dzos (mdzo)*³⁴ [is needed].

In order to purify pride in perception, urine of [animals with] with hooves, such as young, blue female mules of shiny colour [is needed].

In order to purify desire in perception, blood and urine of birds, such as cuckoos, *gong ngon*³⁵ and others [is needed]; and this is the particular root [medicine] of the South.

Thus are the aggregates [(Tibetan: *phung po*, Sanskrit: *skandha*)] classified.

[SECTION Aii]

Then, as concerns joining [the medicine], it is classified according to the elements.

[I. Centre]

In the Centre the medicine of *'dus pa ldan ba'i nam mkha*³⁶ refers to: the assembly of tastes—chebulic myrobalan (*a ru ra*), the assembly of essence—the six good [substances], the assembly of potencies—emblic myrobalan (*skyu ru ra*), the assembly of after-taste—belleric myrobalan (*ba ru ra*), and various others are also needed. This is the medicine of the Goddess of Space whose mind is without characteristics.

[II. East]

In joining the medicine of the East, the purifying and generating medicine refers to:

spurge (*mang ther nu*), [also] called *du rum skad phyad*,³⁷

Cyananthus spp. (*du nu phro*), [also] called *sngon bu g.yu sna*,

³² Appellation of the particular unit of the medicine, see below.

³³ An obscure word to Am chi Nyi ma, see possible explanations in Sehnalova 2018: 198–199.

³⁴ Crossed bread of yak and domestic cattle.

³⁵ A certain type of bird, perhaps of the *Tetraonidae* family. See discussion in Sehnalova 2018: 199–200.

³⁶ Appellation of the particular unit of the medicine, see below.

³⁷ According to Am chi Nyi ma, the first four lines here serve as a bilingual glossary of synonyms: a plant is introduced by its name and then by a synonym of the name. The synonyms provided are understood to be in the anticipated Bon po ancient Zhang zhung language (cf. Karmay 2007; Kværne 1995).

spurge³⁸ (*mang bu phrum*), [also] called *ther nu zhes chen*,
 spurge³⁹ (*skyes bu phrum*), [also] called *thar nu chung ba*,
 And also others, [as] dandelion (*'khur mang*),
 ephedra (*mtshe*), juniper (*shug pa*),
chud bu,⁴⁰
 mallow (*lcam bur*), geranium (*li do ka*), and others.
 This is called the immaterial medicine of the Earth Goddess.

[III. North]

In joining the medicine of the North, the lifting and light medicine refers to:

Resin of olibanum tree (*du ru ska na*),
 so '*cha'*,⁴¹

strawberry (*'bu ta pa 'dren*),

rtsi snga srin gyi 'bras,⁴²

wild indigo (*shing kyi ba'i 'bras bu*),

red lac (*rgya skag*),

juniper (*spang ma*),⁴³

honey (*sbrang rtsi*),

fritillary (*a ma bi la la len*), and others.

As concerns the aspect of lifting, this is the purifying medicine in the breath of the Wind Goddess.

[IV. West]

From the medicine, the heavy fire medicine refers to:

Three kinds of incenses,

Three kinds of salt,

sugarcane molasses (*bu ram*),

gzhi mo,⁴⁴

Inula racemosa (*ma nu*),

fennel (*la la phud*),

asafoetida (*shing kun*),

mercury (*ra sa ya na*),

Morina sp. (*gzi ma byin tshor*),

³⁸ Another kind of spurge is meant than above, the Tibetan appellations differ. See Sehnalova 2018: 201–202.

³⁹ See the note just above.

⁴⁰ An unidentified plant by me based on Am chi Nyi ma's description.

⁴¹ An unidentified plant by me. Possible identifications discussed in Sehnalova 2018: 205.

⁴² The ingredient was not understood by Am chi Nyi ma and thus omitted in compounding the medicine.

⁴³ The identification is discussed in Sehnalova 2018: 207.

⁴⁴ Not understood by Am chi Nyi ma and omitted in the medicine.

asparagus (*nyi shing snum can*),
 rhododendron (*bal bu sur bu*),
Cremanthodium sp. (*ga sho*),
Inula racemosa (*ma nu*),⁴⁵
 mallow (*lcam thod dkar*),
 garlic (*sgog pa*),
 sulphur (*mu zi*), and others, these are
 the purifying medicine of the heat of the Fire Goddess.

[V. South]

The cold and cooling water medicine refers to: joining the medicine of the South.

camphor (*ga pur*),
 musk okra (*sro ma ra tsa*),
 malabar nut, birthwort (*ba sha ba le*),⁴⁶
 tamarisk (*g.yu shing*),
 wine grapes, juniper, pomegranate (*rgun 'bum sda ru*),⁴⁷
Delphinium sp. (*gla rtsi*),⁴⁸
Althaea sp. / mallow⁴⁹ (*ha li ka*),
 saxifrage (*sum cu tig tig*),
 blackberry (*ka ta ka ri*),
 moonseed (*sle tre*),
 bitumen (*brag zhun*), calcite (*cong zi*), and *Aucklandia lappa* (*sho sha rta*),
Meconopsis sp. (*u dpal*), and others, these are
 the purifying medicine of the Water Goddess in blood.

These are particular for the nectar of means and wisdom.

[SECTION B]

Classification into eight branches:

[I.]

Various kinds of animals' eyes and the five essences, such as butter.
 Various kinds of ears and flowers producing sound, such as *Incarvillea compacta* (*khug ches*).
 Animals' noses and five kinds of various incenses.

⁴⁵ The same item features for a second time.

⁴⁶ Read as two ingredients: *ba sha ka*, *ba le ka*.

⁴⁷ Am chi Nyi ma took the verse as follows: *rgun 'bum* as both wine grapes and a certain kind of juniper tree, and *sda ru* as pomegranate.

⁴⁸ A plant substitution for deer musk. Further in Sehnalova 2018: 217–218. Cf. Czaja 2018.

⁴⁹ Only one of the two plants was used, further not identified.

Various kinds of tongues, such as of parrots, five kinds of various medicines, and various kinds of flesh, such as flesh of ferocious tigers. Silk, such as brocade.

[II.]

This is the element of extinguishing strong defilements:

Lungs, throats.

Various kinds of knots.

Various kinds of flowers, such as meconopsis (*mkha' lding u pal*).

Various kinds of essences, such as *mang bar*.⁵⁰

Five kinds of grains, such as barley and peas.

Life channels, flesh and glands.

Five kinds of the five precious [substances], such as gold.

The medicine of the [eight] branches of consciousness is classified as medicine of the four cardinal directions, according to its particular characteristics and sequence.

[CONCLUDING INSTRUCTIONS]

The medicine containers, their silk covers [and] the strings [should] match the colours of the cardinal directions. This is the explanation of the particular characteristics of the nectar medicine.

3. Scheme of the *smān sgrub* medicinal formula

The *smān sgrub* medicinal formula clearly contains a large number of ingredients that are to be collected for the ritual. The formula is composed from several distinct segments. The most elementary division can be drawn into two sections according to the numerical patterns of organisation employed: the first is fivefold, the second eightfold. Each section then comprises different parts, each of which can again contain several units. Within these units, the individual ingredients required for the composition of the *smān sgrub* medicine are listed. The recipe follows a very thorough logic and frame of organisation and in fact no component has been listed by chance. The *smān sgrub* recipe text breaks up into the following segments, expressed in the text itself:

⁵⁰ Un unclear term, according to Am chi Nyi ma likely meaning 'heart'. Further see Sehnalova 2018: 225.

SECTION A: Fivefold scheme of organisation

SECTION Ai: Fivefold scheme of organisation according to the five aggregates (Sanskrit: *skandha*, Tibetan: *phung po*)

I. Centre, the root medicine (*rtsa ba'i sman*), aggregate of consciousness: [human and]⁵¹ animal ingredients (testicles and semen, eggs, flesh, hearts)

Ia. Centre, the root medicine: plant ingredients (the three myrobalan nuts and asafoetida)

II. East, the medicine of *sha chen g.yung drung rta me long*, aggregate of form: human and animal ingredients (heart flesh)

III. North, the medicine of *dri chen kun 'byung mnyam pa*, aggregate of volitions: animal ingredients (stool)

IV. West, the medicine of *khrag ni pad ma sor rtogs*, aggregate of sensation: human and animal ingredients (blood)

V. South, the medicine of *dri chu las drug bya ba nan tan*, aggregate of perception: human and animal ingredients (urine, blood)

SECTION Aii: Fivefold scheme of organisation according to the five elements (Sanskrit: *pañcabhūta*, Tibetan: *'byung ba*)

I. Centre, the medicine of the Goddess of Space: plant ingredients (the three myrobalan nuts and the six good [substances])

II. East, the purifying and generating medicine of the Earth Goddess: plant ingredients

III. North, the lifting and light medicine of the Wind Goddess: plant ingredients⁵²

IV. West, the heavy fire medicine of the Fire Goddess: plant and mineral ingredients

V. South, the cold and cooling water medicine of the Water Goddess: plant and mineral ingredients

SECTION B: Eightfold scheme of organisation according to the eight branches of consciousness (Sanskrit: *aṣṭāvijñānakāya*, Tibetan: *rnam shes yan lag brgyad*, *rnam shes tshogs brgyad*)⁵³

⁵¹ Added following the amendment of the text, see note 22.

⁵² The exception is red lac (*rgya skag*) of animal origin, extracted from the lac insect (*Kerria lacca*). However, the ingredient is not usually perceived as such during the ritual.

⁵³ The *sman sgrub* formula explicitly mentions 'eight branches' (*yan lag brgyad*) at the beginning of Section B, and 'branches of consciousness' (*rnam shes yan lag*) at the end of Section B. The appointed *sman sgrub* performers apprehended the section to relate to the 'eight branches of consciousness' (*rnam shes yan lag brgyad*).

I. The five senses

1. Sight: eyes and the five essences
2. Hearing: ears and flowers producing sound
3. Smell: noses and five kinds of various incenses
4. Taste: tongues, five kinds of various medicines, and various kinds of flesh
5. Touch: silk

II. '[T]he element of extinguishing strong defilements'

1. lungs, throats
2. knots
3. flowers
4. essences
5. five kinds of grains
6. life channels, flesh and glands
7. five kinds of the five precious [substances]

As can be seen, the overall scheme of the *smān sgrub* formula is quite complex. As a whole, the mixture that is to be compounded accordingly is called 'medicine'. Yet, the different parts (numbered by Roman numerals) within the two main sections (A and B) are also introduced in the formula as particular 'medicines'. Each such 'medicine' has a certain purpose and title hinting at this purpose, which is most apparent in Section A. Both the meanings and titles of the specific 'medicines' of the respective parts make the best sense once viewed as parts of the complete framework. This will also reveal the different conceptions of the senses underlying them.

4. Maṅḍala of aggregates (skandha, phung po) and sensual organs (indriya, dbang po)

The larger portion of the formula is governed by the arrangement of a *maṅḍala*, which divides into fifths. In Sections Ai and Aii we see the gradual progress of the recipe in the Bon po counterclockwise direction starting in the Centre, moving on to the East, then to the North, West, and South.⁵⁴ In this order the whole act of consecration is conducted; this order also governs the whole *smān sgrub* rite. In Section Ai the cardinal points may not be openly expressed in the text, but are apparent from its layout and content.

The *smān sgrub* maṅḍalic framework is filled in with an array of philosophical, epistemological, medical, and cosmological notions.

⁵⁴ The Bon po way of circumambulation as well as ritual succession of cardinal points is a reverse form of the Buddhist clockwise order: Centre, East, South, West, North.

The maṇḍalic model itself is a classificatory system by principle, employed in ritual to encompass, represent, and structure the cosmos.⁵⁵ In the *smān sgrub maṇḍala*, we find multiple classifications of various concepts and phenomena. The first Section Ai presents the Buddhist notions of the five root causes (Sanskrit: *kleśas*, Tibetan: *nyon mongs*) of the unwished for cycle of rebirth (Sanskrit: *saṃsāra*, Tibetan: *'khor ba*); the five mental poisons (*dug lnga*)⁵⁶ that give rise to the five aggregates, along with the matching remedies overcoming them; the five wisdoms (Sanskrit: *pañcajñāna*, Tibetan: *ye shes lnga*) associated with the five tantric nectars (Sanskrit: *pañcāmṛta*, Tibetan: *bdud rtsi lnga*; see below).⁵⁷ Bringing to an end this cycle of rebirth, with the ultimate soteriological goal of awakening, is the main preoccupation of Buddhist and g.Yung drung Bon practice. The five mental poisons of anger (*zhe sdang*), ignorance (*gti mug*), pride (*nga rgyal*), desire (*'dod chags*), and jealousy (*'phrag dog*) draw sentient beings into this cycle. Our misinterpretation of reality perceived through our senses constructs the false notion of our own “personality”, and the five poisons make this “personality” cling to itself and the outside world, thus preventing us from realising this and bringing the cycle to an end. The perceived “personality” of sentient beings does not exist on the level of ultimate reality and is only a construct of our or other beings’ misconceptions. In Buddhist epistemology, the senses also include the mind (Sanskrit: *citta*, also *manas*, *vijñāna*, Tibetan: *sems*) as the sixth sense capable of its own perception, as well as processing. Buddhist philosophers⁵⁸ have argued that in fact the “personality” is a mere conglomerate of five impermanent components, the five aggregates: consciousness (*rnam shes*), form (*gzugs*), volitions (or mental formations, *'du byed*), sensation (*tshor ba*), and perception (*'du shes*) (further see below). This apprehension is inserted into the *maṇḍala*, and each specialised unit of medicine in Section Ai of the recipe is therefore directed at one of the five aggregates.

The *smān sgrub* practice and medicine aim at overcoming the five mental poisons by turning them into the five wisdoms, which is overtly expressed in Section Ai. The rise of five wisdoms, or

⁵⁵ Brauen 1997, Guenther 1995, Martin 1994.

⁵⁶ Extended from the initial count of three poisons (*dug gsum*): anger, desire and ignorance. Similarly in g.Yu thog yon tan mgon po 2006: 103. Cf. Snellgrove 1967: 260, note 48, Dorje and Kapstein, II 1991: 118.

⁵⁷ Similarly described in rNying ma *smān sgrub* by Cantwell, 2015, 63–64; in a *sādhana* performed for healing and attaining special powers of the *Mahākālatantra* by Stablein, 1976, *in passim*; in another Bon po ritual context by Snellgrove 1967: 173–183.

⁵⁸ See Holba in this volume, also Williams 2000: 58–60.

alternatively five awarenesses,⁵⁹ signifies awakening (see below). They are the wisdom of emptiness (*stong nyid ye shes*), mirror-like wisdom (*me long ye shes*), equalising wisdom (*mnyams nyid ye shes*), discriminating wisdom (*sor rtogs ye shes*), and the accomplishing wisdom (*bya grub ye shes*).⁶⁰ Each wisdom is associated with a certain cardinal point and in the recipe a certain medicinal unit.⁶¹ The wisdoms are in the recipe indicated in a very subtle manner only by the seemingly uncomprehensive names of the specific 'medicines'. Taking the example of the medicine of the East, we can decipher its confusing title *sha chen g.yung drung lta me long* as follows: The first two syllables are a separate word, *sha chen*, literally 'great flesh', denoting human flesh which also appears as the first ingredient of this particular unit of the medicine. The second two syllables also form a word, *g.yung drung*, 'swastika', or alternatively 'eternal'. 'Swastika' is not only the symbol of the g.Yung drung Bon tradition, which has also derived its name from it, but also the sign (*rtags*) of the direction of the East and of the buddha family of the East⁶² in Bon po cosmology. The second meaning is implied here, and the title of the specific medicine thus refers to the eastern quarter. The concluding three syllables *lta me long* are likely the least comprehensive. They can be translated as 'like mirror', and this is also what they refer to—the Mirror-like wisdom (*me long ye shes*), one of the five wisdoms. Hence, we learn from the title that this medicine contains human flesh, is related to the eastern point of the *maṇḍala* and therefore, also of the cosmos, and its purpose is to generate the Mirror-like wisdom. The medicinal substance composed according to Part II. of Section Ai is therefore supposed to eliminate the mental poisons and transform them into this specified wisdom. This Part is aimed at the aggregate of form and purifying (further see below) the five poisons in this aggregate.⁶³ The titles of the subsequent units of medicine in Section Ai work in the same way. Each in a rather abbreviated form suggests the principle elements of the medicinal unit it stands for. The opening part I. (Section Ai) of the recipe lacks such an introductory label, likely due to a corruption in the text. From a commentary on the *sman sgrub* ritual and recipe attributed to the Bon po scholar gNyo Tshul khri ms rgyal mtshan

⁵⁹ Keown 2004: 209.

⁶⁰ Further in Buswell and Lopez 2014, in tantric context Snellgrove 1987: 280–281.

⁶¹ See the Table in the Appendix.

⁶² Explanation of the Buddhist concept of the five buddha families of the cardinal points in Snellgrove 1987: 195–198.

⁶³ In the part actually only four out of the five poisons are mentioned, which is possibly due to a corruption of the text. Cf. note 22.

(14th century)⁶⁴ we learn that the recipe was supposed to begin with sperm of humans and lions.⁶⁵ The label of the medicine for this part has also probably gone missing. Yet, its full contents and meaning can be reconstructed thanks to the preserved commentary.

The Section Ai of the formula is clearly built upon the concept of the five tantric nectars. The five 'nectars' or 'ambrosias' are a common principle in tantric texts and practices where they are sometimes acknowledged to have intrinsic power.⁶⁶ They constitute five bodily extracts, either (usually) human or animal: semen, flesh (alternatively marrow),⁶⁷ blood, faeces, and urine. In the Bon po *smān sgrub*, their application, at least in the present, is like in many other such practices probably understood as symbolic rather than actual. The five nectars are to symbolically form the respective medicines of the Ai Section of the recipe.⁶⁸ They are to be gathered to purify the mental poisons in the five aggregates. The five nectars in the text are linked to the specific points of the compass: semen to the Centre, flesh to the East, stool to the North, blood to the West, and urine to the South (see the underscored terms in the scheme above, and also in the Table in the Appendix). The nectars are to be assembled from different groups of animals: carnivores, birds, animals with divided hooves, and with undivided hooves; and from humans. Each group of animals circulates throughout the maṇḍalic scheme in a given pattern, in which every group is repeated within every cardinal point of the recipe in a certain order and according to the characteristics of the point. It is hence also linked to a specific mental poison.⁶⁹ For instance, the West is associated with the colour red, heat, the poison of anger, the element of fire, the buddha figure mounted on a bird, and the group of birds in the second position in the list right after the human group which takes the primary position in all cardinal points apart from one (North). The maṇḍalic scheme also provides a means of animal classification. As the analysis of such patterns is not the concern here, I further refer to the Table in Appendix and elsewhere.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ gNyoṣ tshul khriṃs rgyal mtshan, Millard and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished, briefly on the commentary in Sehnalova 2017: 157–158.

⁶⁵ See note 22.

⁶⁶ Cf. Wedemeyer 2007, 2013, Garrett 2010, Gentry 2017: 301–303; in a maṇḍalic classificatory scheme Martin 1994: 89.

⁶⁷ Wedemeyer 2013: 106.

⁶⁸ Their symbolic aspect is stressed by the current Bon po authorities. A discussion of this issue, and the possibility of their actual physical meaning, in Sehnalova 2018: 284–287.

⁶⁹ Cf. Snellgrove 1967: 207.

⁷⁰ Sehnalova 2018: 227–230, 243–249.

However, what principally informs the overall composition of the first part (Ai) of the *smān sgrub* formula? The main principle here is the five aggregates, as they fit within the fivefold maṇḍalic scheme.⁷¹ Each of the five aggregates is “a complex class of phenomena that is continuously arising and falling away into processes of consciousness (*viññāna*; *rnam shes*) based on the six spheres of sense.”⁷² According to Buddhist philosophy, the aggregates comprise every individual. Once they disperse, the individual, whether human or another sentient being, ceases to exist. They can again reassemble for a different rebirth and form another individual. The aggregates arise interdependently and do not ultimately exist; neither does the individual nor any “personality”. Any individual is thus “a flowing, still changing, but uninterrupted causal continuum.”⁷³ The aim of the *smān sgrub* is awakening; this requires overcoming grasping and the elimination of mental poisons. The *smān sgrub* addresses these given conceptions of senses, aggregates, and mental poisons.

The *smān sgrub* recipe begins with cleansing the aggregate of ‘consciousness’ or ‘awareness’ and its mental poisons.⁷⁴ According to Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fl. 4–5th century CE), the aggregate of ‘consciousness’ is the “impression” or “bare grasping” “of each object”.⁷⁵ It develops based on the contact of our senses with the reality around us.⁷⁶ The Yōgācāra school of philosophy, elaborating on this concept, distinguished eight kinds of consciousness (see below), six of which are based in the six senses: visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, consciousness of taste, consciousness of touch, and mental consciousness.⁷⁷ In the Bon po *smān sgrub* medicinal compound, the tantric nectar of semen accompanied by testicles, eggs, flesh, and hearts, i.e. all inner-most parts of humans and animals, is believed to have the capacity to purify them.

The following aggregate is ‘form’ in the eastern portion (Section Ai, Part II) of the *smān sgrub* prescription. Form constitutes the five sense organs and their objects, i.e. eye and visual matter, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, and body and tangible matter. It is also

⁷¹ The same observation by Snellgrove 1987: 19.

⁷² Gethin 1986: 49, following Holba, this volume, also Williams 2000: 69–70.

⁷³ Holba, this volume. Also Buswell 2004, Keown 2004.

⁷⁴ Only three instead of five poisons are enumerated due to distortion of the text. See note 22.

⁷⁵ Holba, this volume.

⁷⁶ According to Vasubandhu, “objects of awareness do not exist as causally significant entities distinct from consciousness; rather, consciousness is *caused* by its apparent objects, from which it takes on a particular shape (*ākāra*).” Gold 2018.

⁷⁷ Further Holba, this volume, Gethin 1986: 46–47.

made of and further linked to the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind,⁷⁸ which are essential in the *maṇḍala*, too. The *smān sgrub* ritual employs various types of heart flesh to cleanse the aggregate and overcome the five mental poisons it might provoke. The subsequent three aggregates of ‘volitions’, ‘sensation’, and ‘perception’, are closely linked to the activities of the senses as well. ‘Volitions’ contain six categories of volitional states related to the objects of the six senses: visual objects, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily impressions, and mental objects. The *smān sgrub* proposes to purify them by the tantric nectar of a combination of faeces. Miscellaneous kinds of blood are then used to overcome the aggregate of ‘sensation’ and its mental poisons. ‘Sensation’ or ‘feelings’ result from the contact of sense organs, including the mind, with their sensed objects. They are either “corporeal” for the five senses, or “mental” for the mind. The final aggregate, ‘perception’, grasps, recognises, classifies, and interprets⁷⁹ specific characteristics of phenomenal objects and unites the sensations of all senses into a representation of the object.⁸⁰ The *smān sgrub* formular prescribes different urines to collect and include in its mixture to purify perception. Vasubandhu’s elaboration on the five aggregates in some cases deals with the fivefold count of senses, and in some cases with the sixfold, inclusive of the mind. The mind is perceived as a sense and sense organ in its own right, focused on mental objects. Moreover, the mind is capable of capturing “its objects and the objects of the other five senses, as well as these senses themselves.”⁸¹

g.Yung drung Bon has adopted these notions from Buddhism and even built them into the *smān sgrub* medicinal remedy. Alternatively, and perhaps plausibly, g.Yung drung Bon might have adopted the philosophical-medical-ritual nexus into its traditions as already applied in tantric Buddhism or even earlier Indian traditions.⁸² Such fabrications of ritual devices are common in Tibetan tantric Buddhism. David Snellgrove has described similar examples of meditative ritual practices based on *maṇḍala* consecrations in which the five aggregates represent the microcosm of “personality” and the five elements

⁷⁸ Further *ibid.*, Buswell 2004.

⁷⁹ Based on Holba, this volume.

⁸⁰ For more details on the aggregates see Holba, this volume, Gethin 1986, Boisvert 1995.

⁸¹ Holba, this volume.

⁸² The interconnection of religion, philosophy, and medicine, as well as the expression of this interconnection in ritual practice and its developments in Tibet are still subject to research. Cf. Cantwell 2015, 2017, Garrett 2009, 2010, Gyatso 2015, Sehnalova 2017.

represent the macrocosm.⁸³ In the *smān sgrub*, the five elements become most apparent in the next Section Aii. In Buddhist as well as Bon po cosmology each element is associated with one of the five cardinal points of the cosmos reflected in the *maṇḍala* (see below and the Table in the Appendix). In Snellgrove's rendering, "the maṇḍala represents the self-identification of the microcosm (the human person) with the macrocosm, which has the nature of *saṃsāra* for the unenlightened mind; conversely, it reveals itself as the perfect expression of Buddhahood when all misleading distinctions disappear in the enlightened state of nonduality."⁸⁴ The five or six senses, five aggregates, and four elements, do appear in this context in ritual conduct and schemes, typically *maṇḍalas*, which function as a support on the path to awakening.⁸⁵ The Bon po *smān sgrub* fully falls into this discourse.

5. Maṇḍala of tastes and their medicinal effects

Another manifestation of the human senses is engaged in the maṇḍalic scheme in the next Section Aii. The organising principle is again closely modelled upon sensual perception. However, in contrast to the above, only one sense comes into the predominant position here: taste. And, again in contrast, the discipline determining the arrangement differs—it is not Buddhist philosophy but the Tibetan medical *gSo ba rig pa*, 'science of healing',⁸⁶ tradition. The taste in the *maṇḍala* features as the distinguishing characteristics based on its major role in *gSo ba rig pa* pharmaceutical and therapeutical practice.

The *gSo ba rig pa* medical tradition shares with the Buddhist (and some earlier Indian) cosmological and religious teachings the fundamental understanding of the cosmos as composed of the five elements: (*'byung lnga*): space (*nam mkha'*), earth (*sa*), wind (*rlung*), fire (*me*), and water (*chu*). The five elements constitute all phenomena. Thus they also constitute the bodies of all sentient beings, including humans. Within the body, they become represented through the three bodily forces called *nyes pa* (*nyes pa gsum*): wind (*lung*), bile (*mkhris pa*), and phlegm (*bad kan*). Wind naturally arises from the element of air or wind, bile from the element of fire, and lastly, phlegm from the joint elements of earth and water.⁸⁷ The three forces are conceptualised not

⁸³ Snellgrove 1987: 201.

⁸⁴ Snellgrove 1987: 200.

⁸⁵ Snellgrove 1987: 200–201, 243–244, 458.

⁸⁶ Translated following Hofer 2014a.

⁸⁷ Further see Finckh 1978, 1985, Gerke 2014, following the *rGyud bzhi* treatise (g.Yu thog yon tan mgon po 2006). For the Bon pos, the fundamental medical text is the

so much as actual physical entities but rather as powers and influences felt in the body. Their impacts and outcomes are both physical and mental, as these two spheres are not separated in the general Tibetan and gSo ba rig pa apprehension. The prevalence, or, on the other hand, reduction of a certain element and therefore of the associated *nyes pa* reveals itself on both physical and mental levels. They form our bodies, yet their misplacement or improper proportions cause harm, illness and disease.⁸⁸

For such unwished conditions, gSo ba rig pa practitioners, commonly and honorifically titled '*am chi*' ('physician'), aim to counter-balance the bodily force or forces in question and restore its or their desired state. The ideal state of both body and mind is equilibrium of all the elements and thus also all bodily forces. Just like the bodily forces, the procedures for healing are also based on elemental theory. The key concept is taste (*ro*). The gSo ba rig pa tradition distinguishes six tastes: sweet (*mngar*), sour (*skyur ba*), salty (*lan tshwa*), bitter (*kha ba*), hot (*tsha ba*), and astringent (*bska ba*).⁸⁹ Each taste emerges from a specific combination of two elements. Earth and water comprise the sweet taste, earth and fire the sour taste, water and fire produce the salty flavour, water and wind the bitter taste, fire and wind the hot taste, and earth and wind the astringent taste.⁹⁰ Each taste than enhances its related element(s) and bodily force, and diminishes the other.⁹¹ For instance, hot taste originating from the element of fire supports the force of bile also derived from fire. On the contrary, sweet and bitter tastes arising from the elements other than fire, suppress fire and thus also the bile in our bodies. Taste is the primary parameter for evaluating medicinal substances, and the tongue is the physician's primary pharmacological tool. For this particular *smān sgrub*, Am chi Nyi ma was testing with his taste buds which *materia medica* to include, as he usually does in his pharmacological practice. Based on such a taste assessment, he produces medicines, and likewise the *smān sgrub* medicine.

This medical theory and practice is reflected in the *smān sgrub* formula. The whole Section Aii is preoccupied with taste. It is again divided into five units according to the five directions of the compass

'Bum bzhi (gSo rig *'bum bzhi* 2006, cf. Millard 2002). Due to its great similarity with the main and most widespread Tibetan and Buddhist gSo ba rig pa text, the *rGyud bzhi*, I refer only to the later.

⁸⁸ Further in Finckh 1978, 1985, Parfionovitch et al. 1992, Meyer 1995, 2007, Gerke 2014.

⁸⁹ The English translations follow the common practice of research on gSo ba rig pa (for ex. Gerke 2014: 26, Hofer 2014b: 49).

⁹⁰ g.Yu thog yon tan mgon po 2006: 62–63. Also Gerke 2014.

⁹¹ See tables in Sehnalova, forthcoming a.

in the Bon po counterclockwise sequence, into which the different tastes are inserted. The Section enumerates quite typical *materia medica* of gSo ba rig pa plant, mineral, and a few animal ingredients.⁹² Every unit is referred to as 'medicine', has its own name and special purpose, and is dedicated to the matching element of the *maṇḍala* and to a certain taste or tastes and other medical properties determined by the element and the taste. The Centre of the element of space (Section Aii, Part I.) starts with naming the taste and other medicinal properties, presenting them as accumulated in the paramount gSo ba rig pa ingredients. The taste as the main factor occupies the primary position. The fruit of chebolic myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*) is shown as 'the assembly of tastes'. Being the panacea of gSo ba rig pa, chebolic myrobalan is recognised to hold all the potential tastes, and thus also all other derived medicinal properties, of all existing substances.⁹³ Am chi Nyi ma regarded these qualities ascribed to the chebolic myrobalan as essential for the composition of the *sman sgrub* medicine. Similarly appear the other ingredients of the Centre, each embodying a certain characterising category of medicinal remedies determined by the taste (essence *bcud*, potency *nus pa*, after-taste *zhu rjes*).⁹⁴ The appellation of the Central medicine '*dus pa ldan ba'i nam mkha* again summarises its content: the title literally translates as 'the space possessing assemblies'. It shows that the medicine of this unit belongs to the element of space and contains 'assemblies' of all tastes and all medicinal properties, and hence can heal all health problems, all imbalances of the three bodily forces. The medicine is further linked to the personification of its element—the Goddess of Space, and its associated body part generated by that element—the mind. In this section the mind does not feature as the sixth sense but rather as a literal 'central' bodily constituent, since the discourse here is not philosophical but medical. This Central medicine is also added to the Central medicine of Section Ai, and at least in the present practice is understood to be the most essential component of the *sman sgrub* concoction.

The other four cardinal medicines of Section Aii are more expressive in medical terms. Am chi Nyi ma assessed the taste of all ingredients during their acquisition to be sure they can be included. Tastes ascribed to particular substances are also listed in pharmacological manuals and field guides widely used by Tibetan

⁹² Cf. Hofer 2014b, compendia of gSo ba rig pa *materia medica*, such as dGa' ba'i rdo rje 1995, also g.Yu thog yon tan mgon po 2006.

⁹³ Cf. dGa' ba'i rdo rje 1995.

⁹⁴ For limitations of space here, I refer to Finckh 1978, 1985, Parfionovitch et al. 1992., Meyer 1995, 2007, Gerke 2014. Analysed in more detail in Sehnalova 2018: 230–242; forthcoming a.

physicians.⁹⁵ Continuing with the East, we find herbal ingredients of mostly sweet and bitter taste.⁹⁶ The label of this particular medicinal unit, ‘purifying and generating medicine’, reveals the strong combination of several types of spurge to purge impurities from the body.⁹⁷ This effect, as well as the sweet and bitter taste, counterbalances particularly the hot and salty tastes of the opposite western quarter of the *maṇḍala* generated by fire. The sweet and bitter flavours of the East support the *nyes pa* of phlegm formed by earth, the element in the East. For these attributes, the eastern unit is ascribed to the Earth Goddess. The North of section Aii too exercises sweet and bitter tastes. Yet, as it is derived from the element of wind and called ‘lifting and light medicine’, it is much lighter and also less cooling⁹⁸ than the mixture of the East. The linked bodily force is wind which the medicine enhances. In contrast, it subdues the forces of bile and phlegm caused by fire, earth, and water, and harmonises the tastes associated with these opposite elements. The Goddess of wind governs here. The next unit is supervised by the Fire Goddess and due to the hot fire element principally boasts warming hot and salty tastes that give rise to bile. The concluding southern medicine brings in the element of water and ‘the cold and cooling water medicine’ of the Water Goddess. The tastes found here are predominantly sweet and bitter as the water determines. The related bodily force is phlegm. In this manner, the medicinal components proposed in each point of the *maṇḍala* act to balance the elements, tastes, and bodily forces of the other cardinal points.⁹⁹ Similarly to Section A for the case of animals, Section Aii can serve as a tool of classification and organisation of *materia medica* of the *gSo ba rig pa*. Medicinal substances are divided based on their association with the five elements and tastes they exert on human bodies, and also on the capacity of the tastes to treat specific health disorders.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ For ex. dGa’ ba’i rdo rje 1995, Blo bzang rdo rje 2007.

⁹⁶ List of the recognised tastes of the ingredients in Sehnalova 2018: 230–242; forthcoming a. The same applies for the ingredients of the following cardinal points.

⁹⁷ The same usage of spurge for healing in Europe is reflected in its English name: ‘spurge’ derives from ‘purge’. Hoad, 1993.

⁹⁸ For the aspects of ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ (or ‘warming’ and ‘cooling’), and ‘heavy’ and ‘light’, in *gSo ba rig pa* and the *sman sgrub* formula see Sehnalova 2018; forthcoming a.

⁹⁹ More detailed analysis in Sehnalova 2018; forthcoming a.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Glover 2005, Boesi 2007.

6. Eightfold scheme of senses and consciousnesses

The third Section (Section B) of the *smān sgrub* formula abandons the fivefold maṇḍalic format, as the only section. Instead, it relies on an eightfold scheme of organisation of ritual *materia* adopted from Buddhist philosophical concepts. It thus returns to epistemology as in Section Ai. The sensual organs and their objects explicitly feature, and also inform the concept of the scheme as such.

The *smān sgrub* text marks these ingredients as the 'classification into eight branches', i.e. 'branches of consciousness'. The 'consciousness' intended is not the aggregate of 'consciousness' or 'awareness' (Sanskrit: *vijñāna*, Tibetan: *rnam shes*, abbreviated from *rnam par shes pa*), one of the five components of assumed "personality" in Vasubandhu's exposition implemented earlier (Section Ai), but another epistemological concept of 'consciousness' (Sanskrit: *vijñāna*, Tibetan: *rnam shes*), derived from the Buddhist Yogācāra or Cittamātra philosophical school.¹⁰¹ Yogācāra scholars apprehended 'consciousness' as a constituent of eight parts, of eight distinct branches of consciousness: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, mental, afflicted, and finally, the foundational or storehouse consciousness (Sanskrit: *ālayavijñāna*, Tibetan: *kun gzhi'i rnam shes*).¹⁰² The first six branches, a notion shared with other schools of Buddhist thought, are established on the six senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mind. We encounter the same list of senses, in the same order, as in Section Ai of the recipe. The sense of sight again holds the prime position. These five sensory and one mental consciousnesses (Sanskrit: *manovijñāna*, Tibetan: *yiḍ kyi rnam par shes pa*) occur as a consequence of grasping and join "together the external spheres of sensory activity with the internal spheres of perception".¹⁰³ They result from a connection of sensory organs, their activities, and their respective objects, and enable the mental perception of these objects. Yogācāra has added to this theory the seventh, afflicted, and the eighth, foundational, consciousness. The afflicted consciousness, or "tainted mind" (Sanskrit: *kliṣṭamānas*, Tibetan: *nyon yiḍ*) generates the mistaken notion of a self. The foundational consciousness stores all the residue of past actions (Sanskrit: *karman*, Tibetan: *las*) which will bear consequences in the future. It gives rise to all the other consciousnesses and "serves as an operative basis"¹⁰⁴ of theirs. In its "purified or

¹⁰¹ The consciousness as an aggregate can be also called 'bare consciousness' to distinguish it from the concept of consciousness in Yogācāra. Buswell 2004: 175.

¹⁰² Based on Snellgrove 1987: 105, Dorje and Kapstein, II 1998: 156, Buswell and Lopez 2014. Further see Schmithausen 1987, Buswell 2004.

¹⁰³ Snellgrove 1987: 99.

¹⁰⁴ Snellgrove 1987: 105.

perfected form”¹⁰⁵ it does not induce the other consciousnesses, and equals awakening.

The *smān sgrub* ritual adds tantric means to the epistemological apprehension and application by yogic practitioners. It proposes to construct these concepts as a material essence; thereby the material acquires doctrinal valences. Section B of the *smān sgrub* formula is divided into two Parts (Part I. and II.). The first enumerates the five sensual organs (the mind is excluded) along with examples of their objects. Both are prescribed to be physically collected and mixed in. The five senses, all apart from one, are represented by body parts, the actual sense organs: eyes in the first position, followed by ears, noses, and tongues. They are to be obtained in “various kinds”, and in two cases specifically from animals. As for the sensual objects, each type of sensory organ acquires a representative external category on which the organ can focus and which it can perceive. Within these categories, the recipe adds specific examples of such possible objects. Eyes receive “five essences”, implying material objects, of which the example of butter is given. The numeral five can either be read literally, or it can function as a symbolic representation of the category in question,¹⁰⁶ in this case the category of material objects. In the *smān sgrub* recipe, eyes can then focus on butter, whereas ears perceive the sound of flowers, such as of *Incarvillea compacta*.¹⁰⁷ The plant of *Incarvillea* displays prominent colourful trumpet blossoms, which at least in some parts of Tibet and the Himalayas make a popular children’s toy to produce noise when blown. The third sensual organ, noses, gets “five kinds of various incenses”¹⁰⁸ as their object of smelling. Tongues govern two categories of objects to perceive by tasting: “five kinds of various medicines, and various kinds of flesh, such as flesh of ferocious tigers”. Both, especially once juxtaposed, allude to the ingredients of the above sections, particularly to the five tantric nectars (Section Ai) and the medicinal herbs and other g. So ba rig pa substances (Section Aii). Only the fifth sense, touch, finds expression solely by the sensual object and not an organ, i.e. for instance no hand or other body part signifying touch is listed. Touch is embodied by “silk, such as brocade”. The plan of this Section of the recipe corresponds to the Yogācāra notion of consciousness—it represents the linking of respective sensual organs

¹⁰⁵ Snellgrove 1987: 104.

¹⁰⁶ Am chi Nyi ma, personal communication (Kathmandu, December 2012).

¹⁰⁷ The specific species of *khug ches* (more commonly spelled *ug chos*) was together identified with Am chi Nyima and according to the picking location. Cf. especially Lama 2001, also Arya 1998, Parfionovitch et al. 1992, Tsering Thakchoe Drungtso and Tsering Dolma Drungtso 2005.

¹⁰⁸ The phrasing itself suggests that the number five can stand for a larger number, “various”, of representatives of the given category.

with their objects. Here in the recipe (Section B, Part I.), we have the first five types of the eight types of consciousness.

This layout repeats in Part II., yet in a different manifestation. Here seven items are introduced as “the element of extinguishing strong defilements”. According to the recipe, these items stand for the eight branches of consciousness, although it is not clear which denotes which, and why there are seven instead of presumably the more reasoned count of eight. Still, we can assume the standard sequence of the eight classes of consciousness, starting with the visual, progressing through the other consciousnesses derived from senses including mind, to the seventh afflicted consciousness, and finally the main, eighth, foundational consciousness. “Lungs, throats” in the initial line would therefore signify the visual consciousness based on the sense of sight, and so forth. This association might sound a bit awkward, but it fits well into the overall scheme. The closing “[f]ive kinds of the five precious [substances], such as gold” makes for a nice representation of the pivotal foundational consciousness. A hint of the maṇḍalic scheme also comes up in this Section in the statement that its medicine complements the four cardinal directions. However, it is not stated how exactly, and it seems to be a general assertion placing this medicine into the *maṇḍala*. “[T]he element of extinguishing strong defilements” hence refers to the medicine of this unit which is to purify the strong defilements in the eight consciousnesses.

The recipe then concludes with instructions for how the whole of the *sman sgrub* medicine is to be organised on the *maṇḍala*. It is to be put into “medicine containers”, covered with silk and placed in the individual cardinal points. Four medicinal containers should occupy the East, North, West, and South, respectively, and the fifth the Centre. Each vessel should hold the ingredients prescribed for the given quarter. For instance, the medicine of the Centre, based on the three myrobalans (Parts Ai, Ia.; Aii, I.), will be in the central vessel in the middle of the *maṇḍala*.¹⁰⁹ Each vessel, its cover and string fastening the cover, should bear the colour matching its cardinal point. The central container should be white, the eastern yellow, the northern green, the western red, and the southern blue. The colours express the elements associated with the quarters: space is linked to white, earth to yellow, wind to green, fire is represented by red colour, and water by blue (see the Table in Appendix).

¹⁰⁹ In practice the placement of certain ingredients only into a certain vessel on the *maṇḍala* was not followed. In 2012 the mixture was treated as a whole.

7. sMan sgrub recipe in practice: senses materialised

The medicinal formula of the *light-swirled sman sgrub* serves as a practical manual intended to be put into practice. All the ritual scriptures of the *sman sgrub*, listing the necessary ritual procedures, recitations, et cetera, are quite extensive and regarded as highly authoritative. So is their part containing the recipe. The *sman sgrub* medicinal mixture must be physically compounded for each performance of the practice.

Ideally, every listed ingredient should be acquired and mixed in. Yet, in practice, many obstacles occur, as many of the items are very difficult or impossible to obtain. In Khri brtan nor bu rtse monastery in 2012, Am chi Nyi ma, the gSo ba rig pa practitioner in charge of the ritual medicine, did his best to promptly follow the recipe. He was advised by the head of the monastery Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che to omit all the tantric nectars, meaning the whole Section Ai. Thus he did not have to deal with the intricacies of unicorns, elephants, tigers, and so forth. On the other hand, he was told to strictly observe the prevalently herbal list of Section Aii, which is grounded in gSo ba rig pa, Am chi Nyi ma's main field of expertise. Am chi Nyi ma collected and processed almost all of these ingredients, with the exception of a few he could not understand, and in cases he could not find anyone who could understand. The translation of the recipe above reveals Am chi Nyi ma's practical apprehension of the recipe. The three myrobalan fruits were of special importance, as they appear at the head of the list and comprise the central medicine. For all the substances, the sense of taste was the determining aspect of Am chi Nyi ma's practice.

Similarly, the last section (B) received close attention, and also necessitated detailed explanations by the Rin po che. Again, the animal and potentially also human body parts, here the sensual organs (Section B, Part I.) and internal parts (Section B, Part II.) were omitted. However, the others were collected. The "five essences" as the object of the sense of sight were represented by the given group of molasses, melted butter, honey, sesame oil, and salt.¹¹⁰ The sound as the object of the ear was included in the form of a trumpet flower. Five kinds of incenses¹¹¹ stood as the object for the nose organ and the sense of smell. For the next sense, taste, the prescribed flesh was not used, but the "five kinds of various medicines" were. They were interpreted as orchid, blackberry, moonseed, kaolin, and sweetflag.¹¹² The sense of

¹¹⁰ Further in Sehnalova 2018: 222. Also Beyer 1987: 290, Zhang 1993, Skorupski 2001.

¹¹¹ Further in Sehnalova 2018: 222–223. Also Beyer 1987: 290.

¹¹² Further in Sehnalova 2018: 223. A variant list in Beyer 1987: 290.

touch and its object of silk was included in the form of a small precious piece of cloth said to come from a monk's garment, which was brought from Tibet by Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag. The article was regarded to be of special value and power. From the following seven ingredients, different knotted threads were put in, to stand for the "various kinds of knots", presumably signifying one of the eight classes of consciousness. Further, meconopsis flowers, "[f]ive kinds of grains" (barley, rice, unhusked barley, sesame, wheat, peas, two types of millet),¹¹³ and "[f]ive kinds of the five precious [substances]" were inserted. The "precious [substances]" came as a powdered mixture of precious stones and metals from Tibet.

The incorporated substances are perceived to behold great inner power. Those passed on from previous and current religious masters, like the small piece of cloth, convey their blessings and authority. The medicinal ingredients coming from the gSo ba rig pa tradition boast their ascribed medicinal effects. Together with the *smān sgrub* ritual action of consecration and powers of deities bestowed, they construct the efficacy of the ritual and its medicine.¹¹⁴

Conclusions

In the example of the Bon po *light-swirled smān sgrub*, the senses of the human body play a complex role in organising ritual structure and in the composition of physical ritual paraphernalia. Philosophical, doctrinal, and medical concepts derived from the senses are embedded in tantric practices and become materially expressed. The senses therefore manifest on conceptual, symbolic, practical, and material levels.

We have observed three different notions of the senses employed: 1. Vasubandhu's treatment of the epistemological concept of five aggregates, into which the activities of the senses are crucially included; 2. gSo ba rig pa preoccupation with taste as the main characteristic of pharmaceutical substances and drugs; and 3. Epistemological teachings of the Yogācāra school of the eight consciousnesses, which are also informed by the senses. The aspects of the senses revolved around the human senses in particular—their sensual organs, their objects of perception, and sensual perception as the interaction between the organs and their objects. In the case of the gSo ba rig pa medical application, it was the sense of taste involved in

¹¹³ As the number of five can be taken symbolically, more items of the category were used.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Sehnalova, forthcoming a,b.

material evaluation and its direct impact in clinical practice. Both the epistemological concepts are developed from the classification of *dharma*s (Tibetan: *chos*) as ultimate ontological qualities and constituents of our reality in early Buddhist philosophy. Among them, the five aggregates feature, as well as the idea of the twelve bases (Sanskrit: *āyatana*, Tibetan: *skye mched*) elaborated into the eighteen elements (Sanskrit: *dhātu*, Tibetan: *kham*s) unfolding into the eight classes of consciousness (Cf. Holba, in this volume, Gethin, 2004). Both the philosophical and gSo ba rig pa theory is based on the postulation of cosmos constituted from the elements in their physical forms and also their manifested fundamental qualities. The fivefold structuring scheme of the *maṇḍala* applied for the first two theoretical frameworks (1. and 2.) has cosmological connotations, and as a device can serve to figuratively structure the cosmos. In the same way, the consecrated *smān sgrub* medicine becomes aligned to the cosmos, both by its composition and treatment during the ritual.

The aim of the *smān sgrub* practice and its medicine is healing, protection, and most importantly, awakening. Human senses, including mind, have been an important subject of Buddhist philosophy, in the aspiration to interpret perceived reality and ourselves as entities with no essential existence and as constructs based on misconception of sensually (including mentally) delivered experience. Hence, it comes as no surprise that these themes have been influential also in ritual practices like the *smān sgrub*. The *light-swirled smān sgrub* addresses these conceptions of senses, aggregates and mental poisons. Moreover, it adds conceptualisations of (human) body and mind of the gSo ba rig pa. In gSo ba rig pa teachings, which heavily draw on Buddhism, the ultimate goal of all healing too is the eventual awakening. The mind and body are not perceived to be divided one from the other, and putting the whole constitution into balance generates awakening.

In both these discourses in the *smān sgrub*, the objective is ritual and spiritual purification (*dag*): purification of the mental poisons within the aggregates, of the elements and bodily forces within ourselves, and of the senses. The term '*gnas su dag pa*' so frequently used in Section A, literally translates as 'purify in [its own] place' or 'purify in [its own] state.' It denotes a return to the original pure nature of the practitioner's mind.¹¹⁵ Such a profound realisation overcomes the mental poisons and the five aggregates. Thereby, the practitioner achieves awakening. According to gSo ba rig pa, if the elements and forces of the body are completely purified, a state of complete equilibrium arises. This state too equals awakening. The third part

¹¹⁵ Cf. *The Illuminator Dictionary*, accessible online: <http://www.pktc.org/dictionary/>

(Section B) addresses purification of the foundational consciousness, again leading to awakening.¹¹⁶ During the *smān sgrub* practice, both the mental poisons and the eight consciousnesses turn into the five wisdoms, likewise the five elements and the five aggregates turn into the wisdoms.¹¹⁷ The practitioner realises the pure essence of the five elements and the five aggregates, and of the senses. Thereby he or she is able to depart from the bonds of *saṃsāra* and achieve liberation. The origin of these conceptions probably goes back to the Yogācāra school, a source of influence on the *smān sgrub* too.¹¹⁸ The *smān sgrub* has the same agenda of attaining awakening via such purification.

Yet, the *smān sgrub* adds a consecrated 'medicine' to accomplish this. All these concepts the practitioner has to work with during meditative practice are materialised in the *smān sgrub* medicine, to act as a physical support for the spiritual exercise. Every crucial point of the exercise receives a specific material ingredient to be incorporated into the medicine, be it body parts of unicorns, myrobalan fruits, or eyes collected from animals. The ingredients are to be mixed, consecrated, and digested. The intended purification thus happens on two levels, in spiritual practice and in physical engagement. The two levels support each other. According to the esoteric traditions of tantrism, awakening is possible in this life. The *smān sgrub* ritual offers the means, in both spiritual and physical terms. The means are articulated in the prescription of the *materia medica* of the rite. The prescription and the practitioners' spiritual practice mirror each other. The practitioner, representing a microcosmos, aligns himself to the macrocosmos represented by the *maṇḍala*. He experiences an inner transformation and purification, while the medicine likewise undergoes a transformation and purification as his outer support. The *smān sgrub* ritual epitomises a nexus of spiritual and physical healing and practice, which are inseparable, and all ultimately lead to awakening. The tantric discourse of the *smān sgrub* masterly blends all these understandings together.

The *smān sgrub* practice and its theoretical frameworks exhibit possible schemes of organisation for ritual practices. These in varying forms appear in countless Tibetan (and other) tantric practices. In the case of the *light-swirled smān sgrub*, several different spheres of knowledge had to come together to produce its complex whole, in all of which the senses serve as basis. Philosophical and pharmacological concepts determined by the senses inform the ritual structure of organisation in both theory and practice, including the compounding

¹¹⁶ Cf. Snellgrove 1987: 104–106.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Snellgrove 1967: 203.

¹¹⁸ Snellgrove 1987: 125.

of ritual 'power objects'. The *light-swirled sman sgrub* of g.Yung drung Bon can be placed among Tibetan Buddhist tantric traditions embedded in Buddhist philosophical discourses coming from India, embracing also its treatment and references to senses. The teachings of Yogācāra are especially prominent. In the ritual this combines with gSo ba rig pa. The *sman sgrub* provides a nice example of handling these conglomerate concepts in one organised whole and in actual performed tantric practice. The *sman sgrub* rite seems to represent a typical example of the intellectual blossoming in Central Tibet in the 12th and 13th century during which various influences produced new units within tantric, Buddhist and crystallising g.Yung drung Bon formats, and specifically also within ritual practice. This article hopes to have demonstrated the many functions the human senses may have served in such ritual arrangements.

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Appendix

The Maṇḍalic Scheme of the <i>sMan sgrub</i> Recipe ¹¹⁹					
Direction <i>Phyogs</i>	Centre <i>dbus</i>	East <i>shar</i>	North <i>byang</i>	West <i>Nub</i>	South <i>lho</i>
Buddha (rGyal ba rigs lnga)	Kun snang khyab pa	gSal ba rang byung	dGe lha gar phyug	Bye brag dgos med	dGa' ba don grub

¹¹⁹ The Table has been previously published in Sehnalova 2014.

Element * ¹²⁰ <i>'byung ba</i>	Space <i>nam mkha'</i>	Earth <i>sa</i>	Wind <i>rlung</i>	Fire <i>me</i>	Water <i>chu</i>
Colour * <i>tshon mdog</i>	White <i>dkar po</i>	Yellow <i>ser po</i>	Green <i>ljang khu</i>	Red <i>dmar po</i>	Blue <i>sngon po</i>
Poison * <i>Dug</i>	Anger <i>zhe sdang</i>	Ignorance <i>gti mug</i>	Pride <i>nga rgyal</i>	Desire <i>'dod chags</i>	Jealousy <i>'phrag dog</i>
Aggregate * <i>phung po</i>	Consciousness <i>rnam shes</i>	Form <i>gzugs</i>	Volitions <i>'du byed</i>	Feeling <i>tshor ba</i>	Perception <i>'du shes</i>
Nectar * <i>bdud rtsi lnga</i> Secret names of special medicine ¹²¹	Semen <i>thig le</i> "Thought of awakening" <i>byang sems gab pa</i>	Flesh <i>sha</i> "Secret flesh" <i>gsang sha gal chen</i>	Stool <i>dri chen</i> "Incense of great smell" <i>zhim phod dri chen</i>	Blood <i>khrag</i> "Lotus blood" <i>pad ma rak ta</i>	Urine <i>dri chung</i> "Scent of sameness" <i>mnyam nyid dri chu</i>
Wisdom * <i>ye shes</i>	Wisdom of emptiness <i>stong nyid ye shes</i>	Mirror-like wisdom <i>me long ye shes</i>	Equalising wisdom <i>mnyams nyid ye shes</i>	Discriminating wisdom <i>sor rtogs ye shes</i>	Accomplishing wisdom <i>bya grub ye shes</i>
Sign * <i>rtags</i> ¹²²	<i>A dang ma</i> A and ma syllables	Swastika <i>g.yung drung</i>	Dharma wheel <i>'khor lo</i>	Lotus <i>pad ma</i>	Jewel <i>nor bu</i>
Animal * <i>ris rtags</i>	Lion <i>seng ge</i>	Elephant <i>glang chen</i>	Horse <i>rta</i>	<i>Khyung</i>	Dragon <i>'brug</i>

¹²⁰ The asterisk (*) indicates categories found in *The Main Text of the Light-Swirled Nectar Medicine*. See note 19.

¹²¹ Added according to Snellgrove 1967: 178–179.

¹²² The same arrangements of the symbols in the respective directions within Bon po context in Martin 1994: 59.

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Medicine vessel material *	Crystal <i>shel</i>	Gold <i>gser</i>	Turquoise <i>g.yu</i>	Copper <i>zangs</i>	Iron <i>lcags</i>
Body functions and parts	Mind <i>thugs</i>	Flesh and bones <i>sha rus</i>	Breath <i>rlung</i>	Heat <i>drod</i>	Blood <i>khrag</i>
Bodily force <i>nyes pa</i>		Phlegm <i>bad kan</i>	Wind <i>rlung</i>	Bile <i>mkhris pa</i>	Phlegm <i>bad kan</i>
Characteristics of the medicine *	Root medicine <i>rtsa ba'i sman</i>	Generating and purifying <i>bskyed cing dag</i>	Light and Lifting <i>'degs shing yangs</i>	Warming: Heavy fire medicine <i>lci ba me'i sman</i>	Cooling: Cold and cooling water medicine <i>grang shing bsil ba chu yi sman</i>
Title of the medicine *	<i>'dus pa ldan pa'i nam mkha'i sman</i>	<i>sha chen g.yung drung lta me long</i>	<i>dri chen kun 'byung mnyam pa'i sman</i>	<i>khrag sna pad ma sor rtogs</i>	<i>dri chu las drug bya ba nan tan</i>

Tibetan Original of the Translated Excerpt

The three versions of the text compared in a diplomatic edition, all in manuscript form (the latter two as facsimile), are:

1) MsA: *'Od zer 'khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs lags s+ho*. Manuscript used at Triten Norbutse monastery during the *sman sgrub* performance. MsA was taken as the main version, the other two were compared with it.

¹²³ The Garuḍa understanding of *Khyung* is rather Buddhist. The position of *Khyung* and dragon is sometimes switched in the Bon tradition.

- 2) MsB: 'Od zer 'khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs pa lags sho. In: dKar ru Grub dbang sprul sku bstan pa'i nyi ma 1998, vol. 168, text 1.
 3) MsC: 'Od zer 'khyil ba bdud rtsi sman gyi gzhung bzhugs pa'i dbus phyogs legs sho. In: dKar ru Grub dbang sprul sku bstan pa'i nyi ma 1998, vol. 230, text 22.

(82)¹²⁴ glang chen dung gi gtsug phud can la sogs te/ 'bras bu dang/ thig le dang rnam shes la nga rgyal gnas su dag par zhes bya ste/ rta gro bo shel (83) mig la sogs ste/ rmig zlum mtha' dag gi 'bras bu dang thig le dang/ rnam shes la 'dod chags gnas su dag par zhes bya ste/ lha bya rgod pa la sogs ste/ 'dabs¹²⁵ *(dab) chags kyi sgong nga sna tshogs dang/ rnam shes la 'phrog (*phrag) gnas su dag par zhes bya ste/ chu srin ma ha'i snying po la sogs te/ gcan gzan gyi sha sna snying rnams so/ de rtsa ba'i sman de yi 'phrad a ru ra¹²⁶ rnam par rgyal ba dang/ ba ru ra g.yug 'dral dang/ skyu ru ra shing kun dang/ bzang po drug la sogs gsal lo/ sha chen g.yung drung rta (*lta)¹²⁷ me long sman zhes bya ste/ lang tsho dri ma ma phog¹²⁸ pa'i sha chen dang/ [gsang ba gal chen phyi yi sha chen/]¹²⁹ glang po che'i snying sha dang/ gzugs la gti mug gnas su dag pa'o/ gzugs la zhe spang gnas su dag par zhes bya ste/ rgya stag khra'o/ wa chen ldang 'gyu la sogs te/ gcan gzan sna tshogs gyi snying sha dang/ (shar phyogs rtsa ba dag/)¹³⁰ gzugs la nga rgyal gnas su dag par zhes bya ste/ (84) rta ngang pa shel gi mig la sogs rmig zlum sna tshogs gyi snying sha dang/ (gzugs la nga gyal gnas su dag pa'i phyir/)¹³¹ gzugs las 'phrog (*phrag) gnas su dag pa'i sman ches bya ste/ chu sram lco (*lcong) bzang la sogs ste/ gcan gzan chu la gnas pa rnams kyi snying sha dang rnams ni/ shar phyog rtsa ba dag sman gyi bye byag go// dri chen kun 'byung mnyams (*mnyam) pa'i sman ches bya ste/ 'du byed las nga rgyal gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ rta gro mo g.yu rngog la sogs ste/ rmig zlum mtha' dag gi dri chen rgyug 'phro la byung ba dang// 'du byed las zhe sdang gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ 'dam seng sngon po dang ri khyi sngon po dang/ dpyad¹³² (*dpyid) tshugs dpung pa la sogs ste/ gcan gzan sna tshogs kyi sbrun dang/ 'du byed la gti mug gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ lug dkar po bang mig dang/ g.yag dkar po shel mig la sogs ste/ rmig pa kha brag rnams kyi lce (*lci) ril dang/ 'du byed [la]

¹²⁴ MsB: starts on fol. 9, MsC: starts on fol. 444.

¹²⁵ MsB: 'dab.

¹²⁶ MsB: a ru.

¹²⁷ Corrected according to gNyos tshul khriims rgyal mtshan, Millard, Colin and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, unpublished, p. 8, denoting *me long lta bi'i ye she* (Mirror-like wisdom).

¹²⁸ MsC: phogs.

¹²⁹ The phrase is added following MsB, MsC (the latter adds *dang* to the end of the phrase).

¹³⁰ Not in MsB, MsC. *Homoio teleuton*, bracketed in MsA.

¹³¹ Not in MsB, MsC. *Homoio teleuton*, bracketed in MsA.

¹³² MsB, MsC: dpyid.

'dod chags gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ bya dkar (85) ze dmar dang/ khu byug gsung snyan la sogs tel/ 'dabs chags sna tshogs kyi sbrun dang/ 'du byed la 'phrog (*'phrag) gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ ci spyang dang byi la stag ril dod pa la sogs tel/ gcan gzan rnams kyi gzugs sbrun rnams so// khrag na (*ni)¹³³ pad ma sor rtogs zhes bya tel/ tshor ba las zhe sdang gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ khye'u dang bu mo mdangs dmar gyi khrag dang/ tshor ba la 'dod chags gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ mkha' lding dmar po rnams kyi khrag dang/ tshor ba la gti mug gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ lug mgo ser la sogs ste/ rmig pa kha brag gi khrag dang/ tshor ba la nga gyal gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ rta mtshal bu rting dkar la sogs tel/ rmig pa zlum po'i khrag dang/ tshor ba la 'dod chags (*'phrag)¹³⁴ gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ wa chen ldang 'gyur la sogs tel/ gcan gzan sna tshogs kyi (*kyi) khrag gsol/ dri¹³⁵ chu las drug bya ba nan tan ches bya tel/ lho ru khye'u smug la gzi byin chags pa dang/ bud med sngo (86) las gzi mdangs chags pa'i dri chu dang/ 'brug kyus pa'i chu la sogs tel/ gcan gzan sdir (*sder) chags kyi chu dang/ 'du shes las gti mug gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ chu mdzo sngon po la sogs tel/ rmig pa khe (*kha) brag gi chu dang/ 'du shes la nga gyal gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ dre'u ngon po ldang tsher (*gdang 'tsher)¹³⁶ la sogs tel/ rmig pa zlum pa'i chu dang/ 'du shes las 'dod chags gnas su dag pa'i phyir/ g.yu bya gong ngon la sogs tel/ 'dod (*'dab) chags kyi khrag chu dang/ lho rtsa ba'i phyir¹³⁷ (*bye) brag go// de nas¹³⁸ phung po rigs su phye ba'o// de nas¹³⁹ gros¹⁴⁰ (*gros) su bstan (*bsten) pa ni/ 'byung ba las dbye ste/ dbus su 'dus pa ldan ba'i nam mkha'i sman ces bya ste/ ro 'dus pa a ru ra¹⁴¹ dang/ bcud 'dus pa bzang drug dang/ nus pa 'dus pa'i skyu ru ra dang/ rjes 'dus pa ba ru ra¹⁴² dang/ gzhan yang sna tshogs par dgos tel/ de ni nam mkha'i lha mo sems can (*sems) mtshan ma¹⁴³ dang bral sman bya'o/ (87) shar gyi sman gyi gros su/ bskyed cing dag pa'i sman ces bya ste/ mang ther nu zhes bya ste/ du rum skad phyad dang/ du nu phro ces ste¹⁴⁴/ sngon bu g.yu sna dang/ mang bu phrum ces bya tel/ ther nu zhes chen dang/ skyes bu phrum zhes chen dang/ thar nu chung ba dang/ gzhan yang 'khur mang dang/ mtshe dang shug pa dang/mchud bu dang/ lcam bur li do ka la sogs pa ni/ de ni sa'i lha mo sha

¹³³ As in MsB, MsC.

¹³⁴ Emended according to the text pattern (see below).

¹³⁵ MsC: *dra*.

¹³⁶ Alternatively, might be also *mdang tsher*. dGe shes Nyi ma 'od zer chos 'khor tshang, personal communication (Oxford, February 2013).

¹³⁷ MsB: *phyi*.

¹³⁸ MsC: The first two words omitted.

¹³⁹ MsB: *yi*.

¹⁴⁰ MsB: *gros*.

¹⁴¹ MsB: *a ru*.

¹⁴² MsB: *rje 'dus pa bstun*. This reading would change the phrase: "in accordance with the assembly of after-tastes".

¹⁴³ MsB: *mtsan*.

¹⁴⁴ MsC adds: *dang*.

gdos pa bral pa'i sman ces bya'o// byang gi sman gyi grogs su btang pa ni/
 'deg (*degs) shing yangs (*yang) pa rlung gi sman ces ste/ du ru ska na dang/
 so 'cha'¹⁴⁵ dang/ 'bu ta pa 'dren¹⁴⁶ dang/ rtsi snga srin gyi 'bras dang/ shing
 kyi ba'i 'bras bu dang/ rgya skag dang/ spang ma dang/ sbrang rtsi dang/ a
 ma bi la la len la sogs/ 'deg (*degs) pa'i rnams (*rnam) pa ni/ rlung gi lha mo
 dbug (*dbugs) la gnas su dag pa'i sman ces bya'o/ (88) sman las lce¹⁴⁷ (*lci)
 ba me'i sman bya ste// spos snag gsum dang/ tshwa snag gsum dang/ bu ram
 dang/ gzhi mo dang/ ma nu dang/ la la phud dang/ shing kun dang/ ra sa ya
 na dang/ gzi ma byin tshor dang/ nyi shing snum can dang/ bal bu sur bu
 dang/ ga sho dang/ ma nu dang/ lcam thod dkar dang/ sgog pa dang/ mu zi la
 sogs pa rnams ni/ me yi lha mo drod gnas su dag pa'i sman ces bya'o/ drang
 zhing bsil ba chu yi sman ces byas ste// lho yi sman gyi grogs ni// ga pur dang/
 sro ma ra tsa dang/ ba sha ba le¹⁴⁸ dang/ g.yu shing dang/ rgun 'bum sda ru
 dang/ gla rtsi dang/ ha li ka dang/ sum cu¹⁴⁹ tig tig dang/ ka ta ka ri¹⁵⁰ dang/
 sle tre dang/ brag zhun dang cong zi dang sho sha rta dang/ u dpal la sogs pa
 ni/ chu'i¹⁵¹ lha mo khrag las¹⁵² (*la) gnas su dag pa'i sman ces bya'o/ de rnams
 na¹⁵³ (*ni) thabs she rab rtsi ba'i bye brag go// yan lag brgyad ni rnams la dbye
 ste/ (89) sems can gyi mig sna tshogs pa dang/ mar la sogs snying po lnga
 dang/ rna ba sna tshogs pa dang/ khug ches la sogs sgra byung ba'i me tog
 dang/ sems can gyi sna dang/ spos sna tshogs rnam pa lnga dang/ ne rtsa la
 sogs lce sna tshogs/ sman sna tshogs pa lnga dang/ rngam pa'i stag sha la
 sogs sha sna tshogs/ shi shon la sogs dar ba dang/ drag bo'i (*po'i) sgr¹⁵⁴ (*sgrib)
 na snubs la 'byung ba zhe bya ste/ glo ba dang/ 'og ma dang/ mdud sna tshogs
 dang/ mkha' lding u pal la sogs me tog sna tshogs dang/ mang bar la sogs
 snying po sna tshogs dang/ nas dang khye'u la sogs 'bru lnga dang/ srog rtsa
 dang sha shan¹⁵⁴ sman bu dang/ gser la sogs rin chen lnga sna lnga dang/
 rnam shes yan lag gi sman zhes bya ste/ mtshams bzhi sman gyi bye brag go/
 bye brag dang go rim gyis dbye ba'o// sman snod dang/ dar khep dang/ gzungs
 thag ni/ phyogs kyi kha dog dang sbyar ro/ bdud rtsi sman gyi bye brag bstan
 pa'o/

¹⁴⁵ MsB: so 'chal.

¹⁴⁶ MsC: 'dran.

¹⁴⁷ MsB, MsC: lci.

¹⁴⁸ MsB, MsC: ba sha ba le ka.

¹⁴⁹ MsC: bcu.

¹⁵⁰ MsC: ra.

¹⁵¹ MsC: chu yi.

¹⁵² MsC: la.

¹⁵³ MsC: nas.

¹⁵⁴ MsC: dang inserted.

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Tears like fluttering leaves: karmic resentment and the senses in Gesar's journey through hell

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Beloved author Ursula K. LeGuin—who is absolutely on par with any great philosopher of the twentieth century—once stated that “the story—from Rumpelstiltskin to *War and Peace*—is one of the basic tools invented by the mind of man, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”¹ Stories, like wheels, are fundamentally tools; they are discursive technologies of the mind through which a variety of Buddhists think, reason, and make religious doctrine. Some of the narratives Buddhists tell themselves have become a focus of academic interest in recent years as increased attention has been afforded to *rnam thar* and other personal histories. And yet, scholars generally overlook the potential for personal transformation afforded by stories like these to consider their more publicly-oriented uses—advertisement for a particular individual’s religious import or garnish on what we can say *actually* happened. We generally do not take stories seriously as tools of empathetic contemplation—particularly if the story in question, as the Gesar epic does, involves a fabled king, a talking horse, and the sort of swashbuckling we expect only in our children’s comic books. In short, we don’t take stories seriously *as stories*.

This article aims to offer a different possibility for this trend, one which demonstrates the veracity behind LeGuin’s sentiment that stories are tools aiding understanding and achieving real, intellectual effects in the world. To do this, we must take them seriously as emotionally affecting, individually transformative pieces of work and consider the intellectual mechanics by which this transformation comes about. This article argues for how one particular story—that of King Gesar journeying through hell to save his mother in the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*²—both imitates and enhances the work

¹ Le Guin 1979: 31.

² The final episode of the Gesar, the *dMyal gling* exists as both a published literary text and an oral text recited by bards. In its literary format, the most prevalent

of Nyingma preliminary meditations called *sngon 'gro* and their associated commentaries. Like a *sngon 'gro* commentary, the story of King Gesar in hell makes emphatically real the religious doctrine of karma through both religious instruction and a graphic exploration of netherworld tortures. Indeed, analyzing King Gesar's pedagogical songs in the first third of the *dMyal gling* makes evident that the *sngon 'gro* commentary *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*,³ known popularly in its English translation *Words of my Perfect Teacher*,⁴ was a direct influence on the text as a whole. However, unlike these Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries, the narrative frame of the *dMyal gling* provides the conceptual space to experience the complex and complicated emotions that arise from witnessing karma's horrifying results firsthand. Considering Martha Nussbaum's work on the role of narrative in teaching appropriate emotional responses and developing compassion, this article demonstrates how the narrative frame of King Gesar's journey enhances the goals of Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries.⁵ The reader's imaginative identification with Gesar as he becomes resentful of the tortures of hell provides a unique context to experience, articulate, and resolve institutionally-inappropriate emotional responses to karmic systems. In this way, the *dMyal gling* allows for a consideration of how the imaginative faculty underlying narrative produces an embodied experience that aids in the construction of ethical agents sensitive to Buddhist karma.

1. An Introduction to the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*

Gesar's journey to hell is related in the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*, a relatively late Gesar narrative published as a woodblock at Wara monastery in Chab mdo prefecture.⁶ Sponsored by retreatant Dam

and influential version of the *dMyal gling* is the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* blockprint produced at Wara monastery and supposedly authored by epic character Chos kyi dbang phyug. This paper will rely on the 1984 edition of this text, edited by Lopon Pemala and published in Bhutan as part of their authoritative 34 volume edition of the Gesar epic.

³ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po 2003.

⁴ Patrul Rinpoche 1994.

⁵ This is not to say that *sngon 'gro* commentaries are unique in their goals of forming Buddhist ethical agents and that the *dMyal gling* may not be drawing on other ethically-oriented Buddhist literature. Rather, a variety of literature likely influenced this text, though this paper will only discuss the apparent influence of *sngon 'gro* commentaries.

⁶ As noted previously, this version of the *dMyal gling* episode is the most common basis for contemporary published versions of the epic, though few copies remain extant. One is housed at the Nationalities University of Beijing and a handful of photographic reproductions of the original text float among Tibetan communities

chos bstan pa (d.1946), the text was published sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, prior to the sponsor's death. Dam chos bstan pa was apparently quite involved with publishing, though Wara monastery's print house remained small. In addition to the *dMyal gling*, he also sponsored the publication of half-size xylographs of the entire Kangyur and a quarter of the Tengyur before he died, and it is possible that the *dMyal gling* was a preliminary project to begin collecting the necessary craftsmen to initiate the larger publishing endeavor of a full canon. Matthew Kapstein notes that the publication of the *dMyal gling* reflects the text's participation in the larger Gesar-related activity of late nineteenth-century Kham,⁷ and it is likely the Sakya monastery had close ties to other non-Geluk monasteries in the area.⁸

Unlike the majority of other Gesar literature, the text is authored and identifies itself as an explicitly Buddhist treasure text, or *gter ma*. The text purports to be the composition of 'Dan Lama Chos kyi dbang phyug, whose title indicates that he either hails from the region of 'Dan ma north of sDe dge, is the personal lama serving King Gesar's most-trusted warrior—the archer 'Dan ma—or both. Indeed, in the narrative itself, it is 'Dan ma who requests the text be written in order to preserve the memory of Gesar's kingdom as he leaves for India. Appearing as a character several times throughout the text, Chos kyi dbang phyug hid his composition in the Red Water Lake (dMar chu rdzing bu) in Northern mGo log. It was then later recovered by the Gling tshang *gter ston* Drag rtsal rdo rje (dates unknown), though historical records of the region make no mention of the *gter ston*. It seems that excepting his revelation of the *dMyal gling*, he had relatively little impact as a *gter ston* or as a religious practitioner; it is even possible that he was the creation of Dam chos bstan pa himself to imbue the text with an explicitly Buddhist significance. As more information comes to light, a clearer picture on the exact origin of our lost *gter ston* will hopefully develop.

Turning to the narrative itself, the text breaks down into roughly three sections. The first third of the text features King Gesar's elevation to Dzogchen master through initiations by

in India, China, and Nepal. Beyond these reproductions, an interview with contemporary Tibetan scholar at the Southwest University for Nationalities Thub bstan phun tshogs revealed that several manuscript copies were produced during the Cultural Revolution via hand copying the blockprint. Based on bibliographic data given in the PL480 prefaces, it seems these manuscripts often served as the source for the contemporary publications, particularly in Delhi 1971, Delhi 1973, and Dehra Dun 1977. No exact date for publication is given for the Wara monastery blockprint.

⁷ Kapstein 2007: 345–377.

⁸ Gruschke 2004: 59–62.

Padmasambhava, as well as his tenure as Dzogchen teacher for the citizens of his empire. During this time, he sings several songs of religious instruction for the various peoples of Ling. Song 2.1—the longest song in the narrative—in particular provides an overview of one’s responsibilities as an ethical agent and the netherworld fate that awaits you if you misstep.⁹ This song will be discussed in greater detail below. The second third features Gesar’s retreat to India, during which time his mother dies. Through a divination he discovers that she has been reborn in hell, initiating his journey to save her and confront the torturous realities of karma. Indeed, Gesar and the reader together discover that she has been reborn there as a result of Gesar’s own bad karma, arising from his violent nature and martial sins.¹⁰ This article will explore the relationship between this section with the one before it to consider Gesar’s reaction to the “result” of the karma system he previously-preached. The final third presents the glorious deaths of Gesar and his court of heroes. While inherently interesting for how they explicitly mimic the marvelous signs and the leaving of relics found in traditional Buddhist *rnam thar*, this particular section will not feature prominently in this paper.

It is unknown whether the narrative detailed in the *dMyal gling* was circulating as an oral composition prior to its publication, or if it achieved secondary orality. Regardless, the particular Wara monastery version of the narrative has remained the dominant form of the story—leading to at least six differing editions re-published in both China and the Tibetan diaspora.¹¹ The narrative of King Gesar’s conquering of hell also remains a popular source of Gesar-related local belief. As uncovered in recent fieldwork with bards living in Qinghai, a bard singing the *dMyal gling* story becomes a topic of significant gossip in the community, as it is said he will die within two years of receiving that particular episode to sing. One local bard explained it as “the epic is finished, so his life is then finished too.”¹² The life of the bard, therefore, is tied up with the story itself. Regardless of the rarity of these public performances by bards, the *dMyal gling* is particularly popular in its textual version. Indeed, it is likely that the text is now more popular than ever in light of the

⁹ Song 2.1 refers to the first song of the second chapter. I will continue to use this naming convention throughout the article, as well as providing the page numbers after a colon. Song 2.1: 92–107.

¹⁰ For further information on this aspect, see Mikles 2016: 231–246.

¹¹ Listed chronologically and denoted by publication location, the editions are as follows: Delhi 1971; Delhi 1973; Dehra Dun 1977; Thimphu 1979; Thimphu 1984; Chengdu 1986.

¹² Gyur med rab rten (Gesar bard in Yushu), personal interview by author, Jyekundo, Qinghai, July 18, 2015.

contemporary Gesar publishing boom in China and the impulse to read, rather than hear, the epic.¹³ This blossoming reputation turns our attention to the text itself and to how the narrative shapes the reader into an ethical agent; it is to this phenomenon we now turn.

2. *The Influence of sNgon 'gro on the dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*

As a whole, the *dMyal gling* is markedly different than other Gesar literature. While most of the action in Gesar episodes focuses on the warrior-king fighting, tricking, or conniving various demon kings, the *dMyal gling* features little violence and no single enemy to destroy in an overarching plot. Instead, the majority of the text features lengthy songs of religious instruction on the importance of karma and dedicated Buddhist practice. These songs mirror very closely the sentiments found in traditional Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries popular during the *dMyal gling*'s publication in early twentieth century eastern Tibet.

Simply put, *sngon 'gro* are preliminary practices in which one engages before continuing on to more advanced forms of Buddhist practice. They generally seek to establish within the individual an understanding of the workings of karma, the value of a human life, and devotional feelings for the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and one's own teacher. Some systems divide the practices into "outer" and "inner" preliminaries—the former focusing on understanding Buddhist cosmology, while the latter initiates the practitioner towards tantric practices by purifying prior bad karma. Within these classificatory systems, outer preliminaries in particular rely heavily on visualization to create an understanding of the cosmological systems that surround the practitioner. As found in the *Klong chen snying thig* practice cycle discussed below, the "outer" form of these *sngon 'gro* leads the individual through a series of narrative visualizations that highlight foundational Buddhist concepts like karma, the six realms of existence, suffering, and proper ethical behavior. Sam van Schaik writes that these practices are "causal, in that they are supposed to cause a certain state of mind to arise, and antidotal, in that they are intended to combat undesirable states of mind."¹⁴ These practices aim to form an ethical agent sensitive to the Buddhist cosmology and karmic system prior to initiating more advanced Buddhist practices.

¹³ Shakya 2004 claims that over three million Gesar texts have been printed and sold since 1980.

¹⁴ van Schaik 2004: 95.

Preliminary practices are generally undertaken under the eye of a teacher, so the actual practice of the *sngon 'gro* may not match the textual ideal, and a teacher may elect to shorten, lengthen, or repeat *sngon 'gro* practices for students.¹⁵

While preliminary practices have been commonly done throughout Tibetan Buddhist and Bön communities, *sngon 'gro* became particularly systematized within Nyingma circles beginning in the eighteenth century. In particular, 'Jigs med gling pa's (d. 1798) revelation of the *Klong chen snying thig* cycle of practices helped to standardize Nyingma *sngon 'gro* as a necessary component of Buddhist practice. Building on Klong chen pa's (d. 1364) earlier systemization of Dzogchen thought,¹⁶ 'Jigs med gling pa attempted to consolidate the Great Perfection teachings into not only a holistic discursive system—like Klong chen pa did before him—but into a singular path of practice that began with *sngon 'gro* practices. The *Klong chen snying thig* practice cycle gained particular popularity in the Nyingma milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—a period which has been called the “Nyingma Renaissance”¹⁷—and ultimately became the defining practice of the school in eastern Tibet.¹⁸ As a result, *sngon 'gro* practices became increasingly popular within nineteenth and twentieth century Nyingma Buddhist communities.

As the *Klong chen snying thig* practices spread, 'Jigs med gling pa's *sngon 'gro* inspired an extensive commentarial tradition that developed the texts into readable and accessible programs for practice. Perhaps chief among these is the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* (*The Words of My Perfect Teacher*), written by dPal sprul rin po che (d. 1887) in an isolated hermitage near rDzogs chen monastery in the eastern regions of Tibet. Like all *sngon 'gro* commentaries, this text served as a guideline to foundational practices with the goal of developing ethical sensitivities and became popular throughout Buddhist monasteries in eastern Tibet. The popularity of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* in the environment contemporary to the *dMyal gling's* publication is especially demonstrated through its apparent influence on Song 2.1 of the *dMyal gling*.

As explained in the brief synopsis above, Song 2.1 takes place after King Gesar has traveled to the Copper-Colored Mountain and received Dzogchen initiations from Padmasambhava himself. He returns to Ling and begins giving all of the peoples in his empire

¹⁵ Dahl 2009: 1–40.

¹⁶ Germano 1992.

¹⁷ The term was coined by Karma Phuntsho as a more accurate description of the so-called Non-Sectarian Movement. Phuntsho 2010: 50.

¹⁸ Gyatso 1998: 3.

Dzogchen teachings. As seen in Figure 1, the teachings themselves read like a veritable canon of important Nyingma and Dzogchen practices, and each community under his dominion receives their own unique teaching, initiation, and guidance, followed by a summarizing song. These songs do not go into the details of the teachings that would only be available to those with the necessary initiations—which the reader might not have—but rather repeat generic Dzogchen metaphors focusing on the luminosity of one's own mind and the importance of recognizing one's natural face. As an example of the former, King Gesar states in his song to the Nepalis and central Tibetans:

The foundational nature of the mind
is like the depths of the great ocean—
free from the agitated waves of thought.¹⁹

A similar expression on the theme of the luminosity of one's own mind is found in Gesar's song to the delegation from Hor:

Meet with the natural face of the Dharmakāya,
[which is] the unique sphere of one's own mind!
Without effort, special insight itself arises.
If you see it, it is none other than a buddha.
It is self-arising, self-released, and a great joy.
It is beyond words.
Its nature is birthless, unobstructed, and self-luminous.²⁰

After receiving these teachings, each people return to their own land, invigorated in their Buddhist practice.

Song 2.1 takes place prior to these individual teachings, however, and represents something of an introductory course in karma aimed at forming ethical agents; this instruction mimics *sngon 'gro* commentaries both in general tone and in specific metaphor. It is also the longest song in the *dMyal gling*, totaling 361 lines. The song is entirely in line with other ethical treatises in Tibetan Buddhist literature—compelling listeners to pay attention to their karma, disavow violence, and to remember the preciousness of a human life. While the ethical instruction touches briefly on the activities of monks and nuns, the majority is more generalized, and could as

¹⁹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.3, 115: *gzhi rgya mtsho nang la rba rlabs 'phyol rgya mtsho gting mtha' bral ba la/*

²⁰ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.5, 122: *rang sems thig le nyag gcig de/ chos sku'i rang zhal mjal bar gyis/ rtsol med shugs byung lnyag mthong nyid/ mthong na sangs rgyas gzhan na med/ rang byung rang grol bde ba che/ sgra tshad bgro gleng zer ba med/ skyed med 'gags med rang gsal ngang/*

easily be applied to a lay person as to one ordained. Throughout the song, however, is the theme that life is inherently an experience of suffering and change, and that one must engage in religious practice in order to attain serenity and realization. After explaining how to prepare oneself to be the appropriate student of the Dharma, Gesar explains the rarity of a human life and the importance of engaging in Buddhist practice:

Although you obtain a human body in this world,
Practicing religion is as rare as the *udumbara* flower...
Mindful of the causes of this moment arising,
make effort diligently in the Dharma.²¹

Gesar later uses a variety of nature-related metaphors to repeatedly emphasize that death comes suddenly and without warning:

In the ancestral burial ground of your family's home
the generations buzz like bees [always changing and
never resting].
Like the shooting star that appears without warning, the
causes of death are uncertain ...
Wild men, poisonous snakes, carnivorous animals, and
so forth—
the causes of death are many
and the causes of life are few.²²

Song 2.1 of the *dMyal gling* mimics familiar themes of *sngon 'gro* literature concerning the importance of religious practice and the preciousness of a human life.

While Song 2.1's concern with instilling ethics certainly demonstrates the influence of *sngon 'gro* practices and perhaps other Buddhist ethical literature on the text, a close reading reveals that it is specifically the *sngon 'gro* commentary *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* that the *dMyal gling's* author used as inspiration. Figure 2 demonstrates a chart comparing literary images and metaphors between the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—The Difficulty of Finding the Freedoms and Advantages and The Impermanence of Life—and the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1. As is evident, a considerable number of metaphors appear in both texts; due to the

²¹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 2.1, 96: *rdzam gling mi lus thob srid kyang/ chos byed u dum war a ltar/ ... 'phral 'byung rkyen gyi mi khom pa'i/ le lo med pa chos la brtson/*

²² Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1984, Song 2.1, 97: *pha khang pha mes dur khrod la/ bu rgyud sd+rang ba'i leb bzhin rjes/ 'chi kyin nges med skar zla ltar/ ... mi rgod dug sbrul gcan gzan sogs/ 'chi rkyen mang zhing 'tsho rkyen nyung/*

significant amount of overlap, I will offer only a few specific examples to illustrate further.

At lines 133–138 of the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1, Gesar states, “Attendants and luxuries, family and friends, the activities of this life—all are meaningless. This precious body carried a mala and a bowl, [but in death] you will be powerless [to do so]. Like pulling hair from butter, you will be without friends; alone you will wander the bardo.”²³ In comparison, *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* states, “Unbearable though it might be to part with your money, your cherished possessions, your friends, loved ones, attendants, disciples, country, lands, subjects, property, food, drink and comforts, you just have to leave everything behind, like a hair behind pulled out of a slab of butter.”²⁴ The butter metaphor in both is used after a long illustrative list of particular items that will be left behind. Similarly, Gesar sings at line 77 of the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1 that “Obtaining a human body is as rare as seeing a star in the daytime.”²⁵ *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* states that “if there were as many animals as stars at night, there would only be as many gods and humans as stars in the daytime.”²⁶ Both utilize the same metaphor concerning the rarity of seeing a star in the daytime as a means to discuss the rarity of a human rebirth.

Metaphors like these are well-known and popular in other Buddhist teaching environments besides *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, so their appearance in the *dMyal gling* is not in and of itself proof of causation or influence. However, returning to Figure 2 and tracing the page and line numbers, it becomes apparent that the *dMyal gling* not only includes a substantial number of metaphors from *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, but places them in the exact same order within the song itself, something which no other Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentary I have examined thus far does.²⁷ This confluence suggests both causation and intent. When composing the *dMyal gling*

²³ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 98: 'khor dang longs spyod nye 'brel grogs/ tshe 'di'i bya ba don med pa'i/ kha phor bgrang phreng gces pa'i lus/khyer med par thams cad lus/ mar gyi nang nas spu jag bzhin/ rogs med gcig por gar do 'grim/

²⁴ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (dPal sprul rin po che) 2003: 87: rgyu nor rdzas gnyen nye 'brel 'khor slob ma sde mang' ris bza' btung longs spyod thams cad 'bral mi phod bzhin du shul du bskyr te mar gyi dkyil nas spu bton pa bzhin du 'gro

²⁵ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 95.

²⁶ O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (dPal sprul rin po che) 2003: 63–64: dud 'gro mtshan mo'i skar ma tsam la bde 'gro nyin mo'i skar ma tsam las med par gsungs pa dang/

²⁷ Among the many *sngon 'gro* commentaries available, I have currently examined the following: 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje 1946 (Available in English as Dudjom Rinpoche 2011); Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo 2009; and Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche 2009.

rdzogs pa chen po, the author modeled Song 2.1 on the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*.

The goal of Song 2.1, and indeed perhaps of the entire chapter, seems to be the formation of ethical agents prepared and inspired to continue on to more advanced Dzogchen practices; as noted above, the songs that follow it build on this ethical foundation to hint at advanced Dzogchen practice. The whole section works, therefore, as a mini-version of the *Klong chen snying thig* through laying the ethical groundwork necessary for future practice, then leading the practitioner—albeit with limited hints and metaphors—towards more advanced stages of initiated practice. While certainly not a substitute or a complete version of the *Klong chen snying thig*, the influence of the practice cycle and its associated materials—both directly as in the first two chapters and indirectly—suggest a common goal. This particular goal is not unique to *sngon 'gro* or *Klong chen snying thig* practices, and—while perhaps mimicking the specific vehicle of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—the *dMyal gling* is surely relying on a variety of Buddhist ethical literature. It is unique, however, to see such Buddhist normative ethics tied so closely to King Gesar. Like the classic fairy tale where jewels unexpectedly fall out of a girl's mouth whenever she tries to speak, the first third of the *dMyal gling* sees the martial, tantric hero King Gesar opening his mouth and normative, non-tantric Buddhist ethics dropping out. Sharing in the goals of *sngon 'gro* practices and commentaries, the *dMyal gling's* Song 2.1 introduces Buddhist cosmologies and forms practitioners sensitive to karmic realities. These ethical endeavors, however, get challenged and complicated when the narrative's source of teachings, King Gesar himself, journeys to hell and is forced to confront the realities of karma.

3. *Gesar in Hell and the Imagined Experience of Karma*

The subsequent chapters of the *dMyal gling* focus on King Gesar's journey through hell. After his period of Dzogchen instruction, Gesar goes on meditation retreat in India. His mother begs him not to go, convinced that she will die in his absence. Her death does indeed come to pass, and Gesar is immediately notified by a messenger. After performing divinations that reveal his mother's rebirth in the hell realm, Gesar flies away on his horse Kyangbu to appear before Yama's throne and demand his mother's return. Eventually Gesar is bested by King Yama in a battle of both song and swords, but is taken by Yama's servants on a tour of hell as he locates his mother in the Avīci hell. This provides the opportunity for Gesar to witness the

real-time effects of karma and receive instruction on the karmic missteps of individuals during their lives from both Yama and his netherworld colleagues. While the first two chapters of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* were used as a primer to compose Song 2.1, chapters three and four—the Defects of Samsara and the Principles of Cause and Effect—are underscored in the narrative of Gesar's journey to hell. The influence, however, is not as explicitly apparent and the text seems to draw more inspiration from popular 'das log narratives.²⁸ King Gesar's journey through hell becomes the principal moment in which the reader witnesses the actual effects of the karmic system.

Although portrayed in the beginning chapters of the *dMyal gling* as a model Buddhist teacher and practitioner who understands the full implications of karma, Gesar balks at the brutal—but karmically-just—torments he witnesses while traveling in hell. Gesar observes numerous scenes of torture, all described in the intense, gory immediacy that has often defined Buddhist depictions of hell: the adulterous couple climbing the tree with leaves like knives, molten metal poured by Yama's workers into various facial and genital orifices, tongues stretched for miles while individuals cry for mercy. At each gruesome visage he encounters, Gesar cries tears that are described as fluttering down his cheeks "like resplendent leaves" (*lo zil ltar*) and asks his guide "how are the servants without mercy for this suffering?"²⁹ The servants then patiently describe the sins that land one there, often decrying Gesar's own Buddhist knowledge and understanding in the process. After explaining that one group of individuals are being grasped by iron hooks and pliers for their mistreatment of animals, the servant of Yama states, "You who are called King Gesar of Ling say you have clairvoyance, but it is false!"³⁰ Gesar goes on to call the servants heartless, before using the ritual of 'pho ba transference bestowed on him by Yama himself to free the suffering beings. Despite being informed of the specific sins committed to warrant assignment to each hell realm—and often having detailed such sins himself just a few pages prior—Gesar denies the justice of their torture and seeks to circumvent the karmic system.

Indeed, the overall tenor of King Gesar's response to the suffering he witnesses is not to mournfully or compassionately acknowledge the workings of karma, but rather to assume negligence and antagonism on the part of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other spiritual

²⁸ Cuevas 2008.

²⁹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 202: *snying rje med pa'i las mkhan tsho/ las 'di yi sdug bsngal ci 'dra red*

³⁰ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 196: *khyod gling rje ge sar rgyal po zer ba la mngon shes yod zer ba rdzun red mod*

figures. Notwithstanding his former role teaching about karma to the peoples of Ling, when faced with the reality of the tortures, Gesar becomes angry and claims they are unjust. This is particularly evident in Song 4.7, where King Gesar—having just accused Amitābha Buddha of turning a blind eye to those in hell—confronts the netherworld servants for their lack of compassion:

You executioners without mercy!
 Why do you give useless suffering like this to samsaric
 beings?
 You executioners say it is because you are buddhas.
 On the path and tradition of demonic buddhas [like
 yourselves],
 the business is but three—killing, cutting, and
 tormenting.
 [You have] the body of a demon without compassion,
 [You have] the body of a demon without kindness.
 Never have I seen a buddha like this!³¹

Typical of the violent warrior-king, Gesar follows this challenge with a threat to lead an army of buddhas to destroy hell itself:

From the mandala of the Conqueror's own body,
 I will lead an army of the Supreme One Hundred
 Families.
 The Father Primordial Buddha will act as general.
 His retinue of the Supreme One Hundred Families will
 build a military camp.
 Emanations upon emanations
 —so many that one cannot conceive it—
 will build military camps in the deathly land of hell.
 By the peaceful and wrathful sword of compassion,
 all the executioners and sentient beings of hell will
 become joyous!³²

Despite the karmic justifications for their suffering offered by Yama's servants and Gesar's own prior knowledge of its functioning, the

³¹ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.7: 213: *khyod snying rje med pa'i las mkhan tsho/ don med 'khor ba'i sems can la/ sdug bsngal 'di 'dra ci la btang/ khyed las mkhan sangs rgyas yin pas zer/ sangs rgyas bdud kyi lam lugs la/ bsad bcad mnar gsum so nam red/ snying rje med pa bdud kyi lus/ byams sems med pa 'dre'i lus ngas 'di sangs rgyas mthong ma myong*

³² Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.7: 215–216: *rang lus rgyal ba'i skyil 'khor nas/ lha dam pa rigs brgya'i dmags gcig drangs/ pha gdod ma'I mgon pos dmag dpon mdzod/ 'khor dam pa rigs brgyas dmag sgar thob/ sprul pa yang sprul bsam mi khyab/ shi dmyal ba'i yul la dmag sgar rgyab/ zhi drag thugs rje'i mtshon cha des/ las mkhan dang dmyal ba'i sems can rnams/ thams cad bde bat hob par shog*

warrior-king reacts to the grotesque tortures with resounding anger and resentment.

King Gesar's balking and palpable resentment at the tortures of hell is anomalous in light of his earlier role as the religious teacher of what appears to be a modified form of a Nyingma *sngon 'gro* text. The narrative points to a fundamental epistemological disconnect: that there is a difference between knowing something intellectually and seeing something with your own eyes. While Song 2.1 and the large teaching section of the *dMyal gling* are likely inspired by *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and other normative Buddhist ethical literature, Gesar's experience in hell is different. It is possible that Gesar's journey through hell is intended to imitate chapters three and four of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—which offer a detailed description of hell, as well as instruction on the law of karma—though the literary evidence of imitated metaphors is not quite so clear as with the first two chapters. More importantly, the tone of Gesar's journey through hell and the experience of King Gesar as a Buddhist figure observing the effects of karma represents a remarkable departure from the earlier section. He rages, he is angry, he expresses deep resentment—above all, he does not act like the wise teacher of karmic realities he was only a few moments prior or that we might see in *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. Two questions naturally arise, therefore: 1. What is the relationship of Gesar's karmic resentment in hell with his prior role as a Buddhist teacher? and 2. How does this narrative as a whole enhance or further the goals of Buddhist ethical literature and *sngon 'gro* commentaries like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*? Is the narrative doing something special, and, if it is, how does it differ from the narratives already present in the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*?

4. Making Sense of Gesar's Challenge to Hell

As detailed above, the *dMyal gling* presents us with an epistemological bifurcation—what is the difference between knowing something and seeing something? And how does the structure of narrative help to first highlight, then potentially resolve this distinction? The *dMyal gling's* first third demonstrates that Gesar knows how the karmic system works; he can detail the causal relationship between inappropriate deeds and punishments at great length and possesses the initiatory authority of Padmasambhava. But he balks with resentment when confronted with the reality of hell—the effects of the karmic system he so easily propounded earlier. Despite the seeming disconnect, I maintain that the author had a clear purpose in doing this. In the interest of taking *stories seriously as*

stories, I argue that Gesar's netherworld resentment in the *dMyal gling* is fundamentally enhancing the *sngon 'gro* goal of developing readers as ethically sensitive agents in a way that only a narrative like the Gesar epic can.

When considering how the *dMyal gling* can enhance the goals of traditional *sngon 'gro* texts like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Martha Nussbaum offers important insight into the relationship between narrative literature and ethical development. Foundational to Nussbaum's vision of ethical action is the use and action of emotion. She builds on a definition of "emotion" utilized by Greek Stoic philosophers to argue that emotions are not merely uncontrollable, irrational movements of energy, but rather evaluations of judgment "that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing."³³ These evaluative judgements have three fundamental parts—an object, a relationship, and a belief—such that they represent a way of interpreting what one senses about the world around them and the objects they value.³⁴ One's belief about the value of specific types of relationships with individuals and actions towards those individuals brings about the experience of emotions such that they are culturally-constructed and individually-specific.

Based on this model, narrative plays a crucial role in teaching people *how* to have emotions through cultivating an object's value and demonstrating appropriate actions towards that object. Stories like *Romeo and Juliet* teach us that the object of our romantic love is important above all other potential objects and that such love is its most real only when you are willing to die for its loss. The life story of the Buddha teaches readers to value mental equilibrium over hedonistic pleasure. Such evaluative judgements naturally lead to the creation of moral and ethical agents who value particular kinds of objects, relationships, and actions towards those objects. At the same time, through following the characters and participating in their inner world, narrative also develops a "potential space" in which the reader can imagine the experience and inner world of another person. J. Antunes da Silva notes that this faculty is crucial to the developing ethical agents in Buddhist worlds, writing that "imagination helps us to exchange our self for others and meditate on the practice of taking and giving. It helps the practitioner to visualize and, somehow, to recreate situations of sufferings and misery. Through this practice, one is able to attain solidarity with the

³³ Nussbaum 2001: 22.

³⁴ Nussbaum 2001: 28.

suffering of others."³⁵ Returning to our example of the life story of the Buddha, the turmoil and sorrow of Siddhartha's family at his sudden departure acknowledges the complex social entanglements in which one is enmeshed and allows the reader to contemplate the tension between those and one's efforts to obtain enlightenment. The potentiality of narrative allows the reader to contemplate another's structure of valued objects and consider how they might react when these objects are threatened. Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen have demonstrated how, when applied to Buddhist narratives, Nussbaum's theories reveal a specific type of ethical agency based in constructing a relationality with other figures through the narrative form: "The ethics of language do not reside in the way *it* orients *us* towards or against certain values, but rather in the fact that language use itself requires certain recognitions and kinds of choices essential to ethics."³⁶ Through its role developing emotions, teaching readers what to value, and providing the space to experience others' emotional worlds, therefore, narrative contributes to the production of ethical agents.

Returning to our analysis of the *dMyal gling*, the figure of King Gesar serves as both a model of and mirror for the reader who imaginatively accompanies Gesar and also experiences vicariously the intense suffering of hell. Through their imaginative recreation while reading the *dMyal gling*, the reader experiences both the hell's suffering and their own emotional reaction to its tortures. Gesar's resentment and anger—despite his evident knowledge of the karmic system in the early parts of the *dMyal gling*—represents a very real reaction that allows people to themselves feel and express resentment. The explanation of karma and the ultimate justice of the punishments he (and the reader) witness do little to ameliorate his / their anger at viewing the netherworld tortures. Instead, by narratively acknowledging this epistemological bifurcation between rationally knowing that suffering in hell awaits those who commit certain actions and seeing it yourself, the *dMyal gling* provides something of a "narrative safe space" to experience these emotions without challenging the validity of the Buddhist doctrine itself. Such emotions of anger and resentment are institutionally-inappropriate, but, as presented in the *dMyal gling*, also normal. Similar to Elie Wiesel's insight that Satan appears in midrash stories to express the human reactions to a cruel God that are unspeakable by the holy men of the Bible,³⁷ narrative allows characters to say and do things more

³⁵ da Silva 1996: 828.

³⁶ Hallisey and Hansen 1996: 308.

³⁷ Wiesel 1976: 69–97.

traditional doctrinal meditations do not. In this way, the *dMyal gling* is a sort of midrash on Buddhist doctrine. By experiencing within the narrative a shadow of anger and resentment at the karmic system through the character of King Gesar, the reader can work through or process these emotions without explicitly threatening his or her overall acceptance of the concept of karma.

It is in the creation of this intellectual potentiality to both imagine and work through difficult emotions that the *dMayl gling* goes beyond the work of Nyingma *sngon 'gro* commentaries like *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*. Such commentaries explain in detail the workings of karma and samsara with the goal of crafting Buddhist readers into moral agents; the *dMyal gling's* first third does just that. As Nussbaum illuminates, these texts use narrative to impress upon the reader certain structures of valued objects—the importance of Buddhist practice, of not wasting a human life, and so forth. The story of the *dMyal gling* does more, however, than the narratives in the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* cannot. Placing these claims about the workings of karma in the framework of a story where the reader follows the protagonist moves beyond the commentary's efforts to construct systems of value; it allows readers to experience the effects of that particular system, to express uncomfortable emotions, and to think through that emotion via participating in the experience of the main character. While *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* does itself include a variety of narratives, the narrative of the *dMyal gling* is of a fundamentally different type; those narratives seldom describe what the protagonist is seeing or follow the protagonist for many pages on an intellectual and physical journey. The *dMyal gling* does just that—providing an immediacy that invites empathetic contemplation. Through modeling resentment and anger at the karmic system, the *dMyal gling* gives readers the freedom not afforded by more traditional Nyingma *sngon 'gro* literature to acknowledge and experience doctrinally-inappropriate emotional responses.

Gesar's challenge to the karmic system and his expressions of anger at its result also leave the reader with an unsettling complication: Gesar's mother's suffering *is* entirely undeserved. She suffers not for her own karmic sins, but for the sins of her son. Earlier in the hell journey, Yama explains to Gesar:

You, precious being of the world,
that desires to lead [your] mother Gokmo
on the path of liberation—
For the great sins of her son Gesar,
[she must] repay.
The kind mother is not without Dharma,
but it is the maturation of her son's great sins

that will mature in Gokmo's body.³⁸

As a result of this twist, Gesar's rage at karmic suffering is perhaps not as inappropriate as it appears; his mother does indeed suffer needlessly. The reader following Gesar on his journey is left discomfited—perhaps not all karmic results are as just as Yama's servants claim.

Why leave this seed of doubt about the justice of karma in a text imitating Nyingma ethical literature aiming to form a reader sensitive to karmic realities? While Gesar's mother suffering for her son's prior attempts to martially "liberate" demon kings makes a powerful argument undermining traditional tantric ideas of violence, her innocent suffering can also be read through the hermeneutics of producing ethical agents. Throughout Buddhist teachings, the answer to karmic suffering difficult to accept has been the development of compassion for such suffering beings. While Nussbaum identifies *undeserved* suffering as the critical component of compassion,³⁹ in most Buddhist formulations, compassion should arise in the face of both deserved and undeserved suffering. What the *dMyal gling* reveals is that the entire notion of "undeserved" suffering necessitates a dualistic understanding of the boundary between "self" and "other." The suffering of Gesar's mother in the *dMyal gling* reveals that such boundaries are fictitious, as Gesar's karma is not his own, but hers as well. Anyone's suffering, therefore—whether karmically-just or not—affects oneself and one's own happiness. In this way, the *dMyal gling* highlights what is perhaps the ultimate goal of such Nyingma *sngon 'gro* texts: to produce Buddhist ethical agents who desire to end the suffering of others as their primary goal. What appears to be a discomfiting karmic mistake of Gesar's mother suffering for her son's sin ultimately focuses the reader's attention on their own relationship to other's suffering.

5. Conclusions

The radical distinction and dissonant relationship between philosophical works and popular narrative is not a doxography necessarily indigenous to Tibetans. As seen in the use and arrangement of metaphors in Song 2.1, the *dMyal gling* was deeply influenced by the *sngon 'gro* work *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*.

³⁸ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984, Song 4.74: 181: *khyod 'dzam gling/ ma 'gogs mo thar lam 'dren chog ste/ bu ge sar sdig pa che bas lan/ drin a ma chos med ma red del bus dig pa che ba'i rnam smin red/ ma 'gogs mo'i lus la smin le red/*

³⁹ Nussbaum 2001: 301.

Indeed, the entire first third of the text with its introductory Dzogchen teachings and reference to the canon of advanced Nyingma practice reflects the obvious influence of the *Klong chen snying thig*. The *dMyal gling*, however, was intended neither to replace the ordinary preliminaries from the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* nor to do better than it. The metaphors found in the *dMyal gling's* songs represent a brief, summarized version of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*—referencing and reminding someone what happened in that other text, but not truly replacing it. The *dMyal gling* is not a substitute for a *sngon 'gro* text, but rather a supporting narrative that deepens, elucidates, and recollects its themes in new ways—a Buddhist midrash, if you will. Popular narratives like the Gesar epic, therefore, have an important role in reinforcing and supporting philosophical and meditation texts, a role that has too often been overlooked.

The epic narrative format of the *dMyal gling* goes further, however, to enhance the *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* as it allows for interpretative possibilities not afforded by more traditional Buddhist ethical literature. While the first third is a fairly straightforward recapitulation of *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Gesar's trip to hell represents a radical departure from institutionally-appropriate Buddhist expressions of the karmic system. Gesar proclaims the entire system of karma as unjust, challenges the executioners of Yama to martial combat, and demands retribution for the netherworld tortures. While seemingly at odds with Gesar's earlier role as religious teacher, Martha Nussbaum provides some insight into how these scenes actually contribute to the *sngon 'gro's* goal of producing Buddhist ethical agents sensitive to issues of karma. Through creating an intellectual space in which one can experience institutionally-inappropriate emotions of anger and resentment at the effects of karmic realities, the narrative frame of the *dMyal gling* allows both for their expression and, perhaps, their resolution. The narrative itself also works to generate this resolution through demonstrating the permeability of the self / other boundary via the karmic punishment of Gesar's mother for her son's sins. All karmic suffering—both “deserved” and “undeserved”—necessarily limits one's own prosperity and flourishing, so one should aim to ease all karmic suffering. In this way, the *dMyal gling* makes the sort of karmically-aware, compassionate agents that are the goal product of a *sngon 'gro* commentary.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the *dMyal gling* raises questions about the interaction of narrative, doctrine, and the senses. It reveals a fundamental epistemological bifurcation, the difference between knowing something intellectually and experiencing it in

person—or, at least, through the lens of the narrative. Narratives like the *dMyal gling* provide an intellectual position of relative safety to experience uncomfortable frustrations and doubts. Through experiencing Gesar's own rage and frustration with the karmic system, the reader then has the opportunity to express their own uncomfortable emotions without explicitly rejecting the system as a whole. In fact, it reveals that having doubts or frustrations about the karmic system does not make you a bad Buddhist—it makes you more like King Gesar. Epic narratives are spaces of potentiality that allow for the safe manifestation of challenging ideas, as well as an opportunity for their resolution. Taking stories seriously as stories means understanding that stories offer contemplative tools working in coordination with meditative manuals, philosophical treatises, and commentaries. To neglect them lessens deeply our own hermeneutical breadth as scholars.

FIGURE 1	
Peoples	Teachings
India; (<i>rgya gar</i>)	<i>Bla ma gsang 'dus</i>
Nepalis, U, Tsang, Lhasans (<i>pal po, dbus, lha sa, gtsang</i>)	<i>Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa</i>
Khampas (<i>kham</i> s)	<i>Zhi khro bka' brgyad</i>
Hor (<i>hor</i>)	<i>Mkha' 'gro snying thig</i>
Mon, Jang (<i>mon, 'jang</i>)	<i>Bla ma yang tig</i>
Menyak (<i>me nyag</i>)	<i>Bla ma 'jam dpal</i>
Ling (<i>gling</i>)	No teaching given

FIGURE 2		
Metaphor / Literary Image	dMyal gling, Song 2.1 line / page numbers (1984 edition)	Kun zang bla ma'i zhal lung (2003 edition)—with Padmakara translation
Three purities— place, teacher, assembly	L: 16-25, p.93	p.9-11; PK: p.8-9
Three defects of the pot	L: 42-48, p.94	p.13-14; PK: p.10-11
Six defilements	L: 49-50, p.94	p.16-17; PK: p.12-15
Five non-apprehensions	L: 51-52, p.94	p.23; PK: p.15
Lama as a physician	L: 53-55, p.94	p.24; PK: p.16
Preparing to listen	L: 60-64, p.94	p.30-31; PK: p.18-19
Eight unfavorable conditions	L: 65-67, p.95	p.31-32; PK: p.19-20
18 freedoms and advantages	L: 71-73, p.95	p.35-43; PK: p.22-29
Human body = rare as star during the daytime	L: 77, p.95	p.63-64; PK: p.34
Beings numerous as dust particles	L: 76, p.95	p.64; PK: p.34
Returning empty from land of jewels	L: 78-80, p.95	p.65; PK: p.35
Impermanence of Four seasons	L: 99-101, p.96	p.85-86; PK: p.45-46
Only names remain	L: 106-111, p.96-97	p.86-87; PK: p.46
Many causes of death	L: 118-120, p.97	p.102; PK: p.53
Death like pulling hair from butter	L: 133-138, p.98	p.87; PK: p.47

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Seeing through your eyes: senses, emotions, science, and the plasticity of personhood in Tibetan Buddhism

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Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the manners in which one of the most paradigmatic relationships in Tibetan Buddhism, the guru-disciple relationship, is rooted in practices and ontologies that can directly influence and potentially transform one's sense of self, or personhood. Such transformative potential is expressed within Tibetan Buddhist traditions, for instance, in the transmission from guru to disciple of certain spiritual technologies that aim at awakening one to their own already fully-enlightened nature. The practice of deity yoga, in which the practitioner strives to become familiarized with this idea of a hidden enlightened nature through the systematic identification with fully-enlightened deities, is perhaps the case in point that most clearly conveys the malleability that notions of self and identity acquire within the context of the tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite their centrality and even direct relevance for the thesis I develop in this paper, these tantric practices will not be my main focus here. Instead I will investigate two different accounts in which it is possible to identify with the figure of the guru this potential to transform our perception of what constitutes the self. The first account discusses a trip undertaken by the seventeenth-century rNying ma master Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597–1650) and his disciples to bKra shis sdings, the site considered to be the navel of Sikkim's sacred geography. It is Lha btsun himself who narrates the details of this trip in one of his numerous autobiographical works. The second account also has at its core important representatives of Tibetan Buddhism, but it takes place in a much later era, and involves advanced technologies and modern laboratories. In this account, the Tibetan master of Karma bKa' brgyud and rNying ma lineages Yongey

Mingyur Rinpoche¹ (b. 1975), and the French-born rNying ma monk Matthieu Ricard (b. 1946) are tested through different scientific procedures in laboratories while in meditative states.

Distant in time, and in nature, these accounts nevertheless have in common some significant structural elements. We can easily discern in both of them, for instance, certain dichotomies that are “resolved” by means of what could be termed “translation mechanisms”: the hidden versus the apparent; subjectivity versus objectivity; the private versus the public. The “translators,” identified as I discuss below with the figure of the shaman, are the gurus, but also the scientists. They are the figures mediating between these opposing poles, rendering the hidden apparent; subjectivity objective; and the private public. The senses figure in these accounts as mediators between these different extremes. However, these are not fixed entities. The senses, and also the emotions, constitute the ground for transformation that can lead to the expansion of the sense of self, or personhood, through means that range from the practice of informing the perception of the landscape with sacred imagery, to scientific scrutiny.

Hence, my aim in this paper will not be to identify particular cultural notions of personhood, but to focus on the fluidity of this category in contexts that involve the presence and activities of Tibetan masters. In this investigation, I will focus especially on the role played by the senses and emotions in the constitution of such fluidity. I call the dynamism involved in these processes of transformation the *plasticity of personhood*. The choice of the term *plasticity* is not a random one. The reference here is to the concept of *neuroplasticity*—“the capacity of neural connections to change and reorganize”—which could arguably be said to be one of the most important scientific discoveries of the last few decades. It was thanks to the development of the concept of neuroplasticity that a scientific interest emerged in the potentially beneficial effects of contemplative practices on the brain. The reference to neuroplasticity in the concept of the plasticity of personhood also has the purpose of connecting the two accounts that constitute the bulk of this paper, pointing at the same time to the potential embodied by these gurus to enhance human life, leading to systematized new avenues for human flourishing.

Before delving into these accounts, I would like to briefly discuss the connections between Buddhist ideas and recent developments in anthropology around the category of the person.

¹ Due to Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche being well-known by the phonetic rendition of his name and also due to the nature of the discussion in the second part of this essay, I chose not to render his name into Wylie.

² Presti 2016: xii.

The category of the person and Buddhism

With the publication of Marcel Mauss's essay "Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de 'moi'" ["A Category of the Human Mind: the notion of the person, the notion of the self"] in 1938,³ the notion of person, or personhood, became an important category in the social sciences.⁴ The tradition of Mauss, which would be taken up by Louis Dumont,⁵ and appear in the works of authors such as Clifford Geertz,⁶ considers notions of person to be native categories of thought, culturally variable constructs.

More recently, and I would highlight here research and analytical findings connected to Melanesian and Amazonian ethnographies, new developments in this domain have led to important critical reevaluations of well-established anthropological concepts, such as individual and society. It is this more recent kind of approach that interests me here. Marilyn Strathern's work is particularly relevant in this domain, constituting among other things an attempt to deconstruct Western notions of the 'individual' and 'individualism.' In *The Gender of the Gift*, Strathern argues that "Melanesian persons are as dividual as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them."⁷ The reference to the dividual quality of the person comes, as she directly declares, from McKim Marriot's remarks about South Asian theories of person. Marriot believes that persons are not construed in South Asia to be individual, or indivisible bounded entities. They are thought instead to be dividual, or divisible.⁸ Behind both approaches is the idea that persons forge their identity from their relationships with other persons, the spiritual world, objects, and lands—to mention just a few of the constituent factors of personhood and sociality according to these schemes.

There are many doctrinal aspects of Buddhism that could be seen as being in harmony with this approach in anthropology. The most evident and, in a way, overarching of all is the doctrine of dependent origination, which proclaims that all entities, lacking inherent existence, come about through a relational nexus of causes and conditions. Any attempt to get to a notion of person in a Buddhist

³ Mauss 1938.

⁴ For a classic discussion on the notion of personhood in Buddhist societies see Collins 1982.

⁵ Dumont 1983.

⁶ Geertz 1973.

⁷ Strathern 1988: 13.

⁸ Ibid.: 348n7.

context will veer precisely towards this relationism/dividualism approach of anthropology.

Directly connected to the doctrine of dependent origination is the notion of non-self, another core doctrinal formulation of Buddhism. The notion of non-self holds that a sense of self as an unchanging, permanent entity is fundamentally flawed. What we experience in being a person should be more precisely defined as a process of becoming in permanent flow, in which no essence can be found. In Gethin's words, "Linguistic usage and no doubt certain emotional and psychological circumstances predispose us to an understanding of personal identity and selfhood in terms of an 'I' that exists as an autonomous individual and who has various experiences. In this way I assume—perhaps unconsciously—that although my experiences may vary there is something-me-that remains constant. In other words, it only makes sense to talk in terms of my having experiences if there is a constant 'I' that can somehow be considered apart from and separately from those experiences."⁹ Within the Buddhist doctrinal framework, this sense of 'I' is considered to be a mere illusion. The experiential sense of personal continuity we all have is explained then with reference to the specific manner in which the mental and physical phenomena that constitute a being are causally connected. Hence, causal processes are what gives rise to this sense of personal continuity.

This ever-changing, insubstantial quality of the self in Buddhism serves as the ground for change both in conceptual and actual terms. The senses and emotions play a constitutional role in the continuous emergence of this illusory self. And we will see in the two accounts discussed below how concepts of the person can be transformed precisely through controlling and enhancing the senses and emotions.

Part 1: Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med

The literary production of Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med lends itself well to the discussion I am proposing here. In Lha btsun's extensive literary corpus, there are numerous examples of texts that consistently interweave his mystical visions, their places of revelation, the esoteric teachings that ensued, and the wider social contexts of their revelation and dispensation, including sometimes particular audiences. This kind of visionary autobiographical work, through creating a sense of reality in the act of narration, can elucidate, I believe, the mechanisms through which notions of personhood and sociality are constructed in some Tibetan contexts. Further, it can show how notions of

⁹ Gethin 1998: 135.

personhood, especially in the paradigmatic case of the guru, cannot be fully apprehended without regard to relations with other persons, landscape, and textual production.

Lha btsun was renowned as one of the four pioneer Tibetan lamas to have opened, in the seventeenth century, the “hidden land” of Sikkim, or ‘Bras ljongs in Tibetan. He is perhaps more widely known in the general Tibetan Buddhist world for having discovered the *Ri bo bsang mchod*, which literally means “Mountain Smoke Offering” as part of his *gter ma* cycle *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub*, or *Accomplishing the Life-Force of the Vidyādhara*s. The twentieth-century rNying ma master bDud ’joms Rin po che would later compose an abbreviated version of the *Ri bo bsang mchod* for the purpose of daily practice—this is the version that is extensively practiced today in Tibetan communities and Dharma centers around the world. It is also important to highlight here the central role that pure visions played in the life and work of Lha btsun. Tulku Thondup Rinpoche in fact takes the example of the *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub* as paradigmatic of mind *gter mas* discovered in the form of Pure Vision Teachings. According to him, “Lha btsun discovered his teachings in the form of pure visions when he received the blessing of Vajravārāhī, and transcribed them as Pure Vision teachings.”¹⁰

In this section, I focus my efforts on a section of a travel memoir—this is how I am translating *lam yig* in this particular case—written by Lha btsun regarding his journey to Sikkim. The very long title in Tibetan could be translated as *The Travel Memoir of My Wide Open Magically Playful Wanderings through The Celestially Manifested Palace ‘Bras mo gshongs entitled A Thousand Lights of the Blazing Sun*.¹¹ Here, I refer to it simply as *Travel Memoir*. This is a work of approximately three hundred folio sides, which is found in the third volume of his *gSung ’bum*.

Two elements in his *Travel Memoir* seem to occupy strategic connecting points in the network of associations that are traced by him in the narrative. These are his mystical visions and the hidden land of Sikkim. As we shall see, in the narrative, both of these elements express the theme of the dichotomy between the apparent and the hidden. I believe that in the context of the visionary traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, this dichotomy should be highlighted as a theoretical framework that adds an additional layer to the opposition between individualism and dividualism that dominates classic and more recent

¹⁰ Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1986: 90–91.

¹¹ *mKha’ spyod sprul pa’i pho brang ‘bras mo gshongs su har sangs sgyu ma’i rol rtsed nyul ba’i lam yig rab gsal nyin byed ‘bar ba’i ‘od stong zhes bya ba bzhugs pa’i dbu phyogs lags so*

developments in anthropology regarding the concepts of personhood and sociality.

The section of the *Travel Memoir* discussed here corresponds to a trip undertaken in 1647 by Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med and some of his disciples to bKra shis sdings. This section corresponds to 55 folio sides of the *Travel Memoir*. This trip happened, according the Lha btsun just after his coronation of the first king of Sikkim, Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal.¹² Even though in his book *Opening the Hidden Land*, Saul Mullard calls attention to the fact that the coronation date for the first king of Sikkim remains elusive due to numerous contradictory dates that are proposed by different authors,¹³ it nonetheless seems reasonable to believe that Lha btsun performed at least a second coronation of the king in 1647, since the first one is recorded in some documents to have occurred sometime in 1644.

The relevant passage starts with Lha btsun discussing the characteristics of bKra shis sdings with his party, which included the king himself and his entourage. At that time, Lha btsun tells us, he had an intense yearning to outwardly relate in full the histories concerning the external shape of the place and where its inner and outer door face, and so forth. Internally, he says, he carefully consulted the *gnas yigs*, which Guru Rinpoche intended for future beings. Finally, secretly, he supplicated the assembly of the three roots and the pledge-bound protectors and requested some kind of prognostication about the place—from the text we understand that they were trying to identify the land called bKra shis sdings, as described in the travel guides.

It is interesting to note here the three levels in which Lha btsun expresses himself in relation to his quest for bKra shis sdings: the outer, inner, and secret levels. This triad is also present in the typology of subgenres of Tibetan autobiographies, which seems to indicate that these three levels represent an important paradigm in notions of what might constitute a person according to Tibetan Buddhist ideas. The guru or lama represents the ideal for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, having at least in theory actualized the potentials of body, speech, and mind. One of his or her characteristics is the ability to mediate between the outer, inner, and secret modes of being.

Having this idea in mind, I would like to draw a comparison here between the guru and the shaman in some Amerindian societies in the Amazon. Brazilian anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha has taken up the issue of shamanism as a mode of translation. She argues

¹² I would like to thank James Gentry for his invaluable assistance in the translation of the passages reproduced in this paper.

¹³ Mullard 2011: 133–136.

that shamans are translators in the Benjaminian sense of the term¹⁴ insofar as their goal is to “establish harmonies or resonances between worlds or planes that are seen from different perspectives.”¹⁵ A similar idea was also explored in a similar way by Geoffrey Samuel in his *Civilized Shamans* (1993). The first idea I want to retain from this comparison is the conscious and intentional access to different levels of reality as a feature intrinsic to the tantric master.

As we will see, the role Lha btsun plays for his audience in the opening of the hidden land of Sikkim is close to that of the shaman described as translator. Such an act of translation happens through different means that nevertheless work in conjunction with each other. I would like to single out here three of these means of translation, or articulations of perspectives in relation to the hidden land: ritual, enhancing the perception of the landscape, and mystical visions. I will go through these items in the order they appear in the selected passage.

1.1 Ritual

Firstly, there is the instance of ritual.

Lha btsun and his party conducted a series of more than five hundred rituals in order to “open” the land. As he narrates,

Then, just as taught by the great Vidyādhara Padmasambhava, we performed 108 smoke offering rituals, 108 burnt offering rituals, 108 purification rituals, 100 feast offering rituals, and 100 reparation rituals. We recited out loud the *dhāraṇī sūtras* and the *bKa' thang* literature. And we proclaimed the previous commands along with the pledges. Then in consultation with the intention of the pilgrimage guides, we measured in detail the lines of the earth, sky, and water.¹⁶

The *bKa' thang* literature refers to the life stories of Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava is, of course, a constant presence throughout Lha btsun's narrative. In this sense, it should be noted from the outset that Padmasambhava acts as an invisible counterpart to Lha btsun, functioning as the paradigmatic exemplar of the tantric guru as mediator between multiple planes of existence.

¹⁴ Benjamin 1968.

¹⁵ Carneiro da Cunha. 1999.

¹⁶ Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med 1974, 562.6–563.2: *de'i tshe rig 'dzin chen po padma 'byung gnas de nyid kyi ji ltar gsungs pa'i lha bsang brgya rtsa/ sbyin sreg brgya rtsa/ khrus gsol brgya rtsa/ tshogs brgya/ bskang brgya/ mdo gzungs bka' thang sgrogs pa/ bka' nan rab brjid/ dam bsgrag dang bcas zhib par grub ste/ slar yang gnas yig rnam kyi dgongs pa dang bstun te/ sa thig/ gnam thig/ chu thig rnam legs bar gzhal ba las/*

Without going into the details of the rituals performed on this occasion, it is possible to say at the very least that one of their effects was to create through performance an imaginative display for his disciples of the hidden aspects of the land, which include both invisible aspects of the land itself, and its invisible inhabitants. Since Lha btsun does not reveal in his text the titles of these rituals, I will refer here as an illustration to the *Ri bo bsang mchod*, which is, as I mentioned above, the most well-known work associated with Lha btsun. Anyone who has performed or witnessed the performance of the *Ri bo bsang mchod* has probably taken notice of the profusion of invisible beings described in it. It is to these beings that smoke offering is directed.

In a later passage in the *Travel Memoir*, when another ritual is performed, this idea is made even more explicit:

Later on during the full moon day, we brought the immeasurable outer and inner offering substances, which were actually present and mentally manifested, including the auspicious symbols and so forth. And we set up an immeasurable feast offering. When I was washing and consecrating the auspicious jewel box with an assembly of hundreds of fortunate ones, in the infinite direction surrounding the place, there was a rain of bouquets of divine flowers and the fragrance of incense pervaded the place—the entire environment. An assembly of kinnaras, gods, nāgas, kumbhāṇḍas, and so forth attracted to this, gathered like clouds. Instantaneously, in the great gathering assembled there, some sang songs, some danced, some played music [...].¹⁷

As this episode illustrates, through the performance of the ritual, a sense of the presence of these beings is directly created for the practitioners. In sum, the performance of ritual directly articulates the perspectives of what the audience is actually seeing, i.e. the bare landscape of bKra shis sdings, and the other dimensions of the landscape.

¹⁷ Ibid., 571.6–572.4: *nya yongs su gang ba'i nyin slar yang bkra shis rdzas rtags la sogs pa'i phyi nang gi mchod rdzas dngos 'byor yid sprul dpag tu med thogs shing tshogs kyi 'khor lo dpag tu med pa bshams te/ skal ldan gyi tshom bu brgya phrag mang po dang bcas bkra shis nor bu'i za ma tog dam pa de nyid la khros gsol mnga' dbul sogs bgyis skabs/ khor yug mi zad pa'i mtha' klas par lha yi me tog gi chun po'i char dang / dri zhim gan spos ki ngad legs par brdal pa la ji ltar rjes su chags pa'i mi'ang ci dang / lha dang / klu dang / grul bun gyi tshogs kyang sprin bzhin gtib pa las/ de'i mod la 'dus pa'i khrom chen rnam la la ni glu len/ la la ni shon rtse/ la la ni bro brdung/*

1.2 Enhancing the perception of the landscape

The second instance through which translation happens is the description of bKra shis sdings's qualities in accordance to *gnas yigs*, or pilgrimage guides. Just after performing the rituals to open the land, Lha btsun describes bKra shis sdings for the benefit of his disciples, articulating once more in this way (and even more directly) the many perspectives in relation to the landscape.

This same triad of outer, inner, and secret is evoked once more in the description of bKra shis sdings, based on the *gter ma* travel guide discovered by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, *Yab sras kyi lam yig*. On the outer level, the physical landscape is described as being quite exceptional. The main mountain of the place resembles "a king on a throne;" the four surrounding mountains are like "silk curtains;" the "five mountains in the upper part of the valley look like a divine crown;" and there are "seven lakes that look like mirrors" and so on and so forth.¹⁸

Citing another work, the *Byang gter kha byang*, Lha btsun describes the so-called inner level. On this level, bKra shis sdings is the palace of the deity Vajrasattva; the sandalwood trees that grow in the four directions are the palaces of the four buddhas belonging to the so called "buddha families;" the caves of the physical landscape are the residence of bodhisattvas, goddesses and so forth.

Finally, in this same text cited by Lha btsun, on the so-called secret level, the physical layout of the land, its glaciers, mountains, and waters are associated with the concept of the subtle body in tantric Buddhist yoga, being said to exist in the "manner of energy channels, *cakras*, and drops inside the body; the glaciers of the five treasury peaks," which corresponds to the mountain known today as Kanchenjunga peak, are said to exist in the "manner of a skull;" "the glacial waters, which are like a hanging white silk, are the flow of *bodhicitta*; the medicinal forest between the mountains and the valleys exists in the manner of the *cakra* of rapture in the throat; and in the center of all this is Brag dkar bKra shis sdings, which exists in the manner of the *chos kyi 'khor lo*—the heart *cakra*."¹⁹

There are, of course, many interesting connections that could be traced in these descriptions. I would like to highlight here only one of these: the homology on the secret level between the layout of the land seen as a subtle body and the human subtle body. This

¹⁸ Ibid., 563.

¹⁹ Ibid., 567.5–6: *gangs chu dar dkar phyar ba 'dra ba'i byang chub kyi sems 'bab pa/ ri dang lung pa'i mtshams na sman gyi nags tshal spungs pa/ mgrin pa longs spyong kyi 'khor lo'i tshul du yod pa/ 'bab chu'i drag dal shan phyed pa/ chu'i sgra skad tshangs pa'i gsung ltar sgrogs pa/ dbus na brag dkar bkra shis sding chos kyi 'khor lo'i tshul du yod pa/*

“individualization” of the land according to tantric Buddhist yoga suggests a subjectivity pertaining to the landscape itself. The land is in this view an actor. Indeed, in numerous instances in the passage selected, and in other works as well, the land directly acts upon Lha btsun, causing, among other things, visions to emerge.

2.3 Vision

The third and final means of translation I would like to discuss in this section relates to visionary experience, or *dag snang*. In the passage selected we have two instances in which mystical visions arise: a collective vision and a vision experienced only by the lama.

The first one happens as soon as Lha btsun finishes describing the landscape to his audience:

Then, from the peak of the burst-open wheel of the blue mansion—the gem-like five-fold treasury of jewel glacial mountains, stainless and white—the collective form of the compassion of all the buddhas, Padmasambhava, in order to cut through the net of my doubts, amidst a sphere of swirling rainbow light, excellently laid down a drop/line of immutable wisdom. The Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal and all the other fortunate people gathered there encountered that and everyone became intoxicated with joy.²⁰

The account of this collective vision is without a doubt the high point in the passage from the *Travel Memoir* that I am analyzing here. This vision seals together the processes of informing, and thereby transforming the perception of the landscape that I discussed in the previous sections. Further, it enacts the well-diffused doctrinal idea in Tibetan Buddhism that there is a continuity between the mind of the guru and the mind of the disciple, which could be seen as meaning that they are the *same person*. The concept of *maṇḍala*, which permeates both the ideas of the individual and community in Tibetan Buddhism, is also an important reference here.²¹ In this regard, it should be noted that in the passage quoted above there is a play on words in the expression “drop/line of immutable wisdom”—‘*gyur med ye shes kyi thig*. It means the wisdom essence of sentient beings, and the “line of a *maṇḍala*” drawing, as in *thig btab*, which means to trace the lines of a

²⁰ Ibid., 569.1–3: *de'i tshes dri med rab tu dkar pa'i gangs ri rin po che mdzod lnga nor bu'i khang bzang sngö sangs kyi 'khor lo rtol ba'i rtse nas rgyal ba kun gyi thugs rje'i spyi gzugs dam pa padma 'byung gnas gang gis bdag blo'i the tshom gi drwa bcod phyir 'ja' 'od kyi zer klong 'khrug ba'i klong nas 'gyur med ye shes kyi thig legs bar btab pas chos kyi rgyal po phun tshogs rnam rgyal la sogs der 'dus pa'i skal ldan gyi skyes bu kun gyis mijal te thams cad kyang dga' bas rab tu myos bar gyur/*

²¹ Gray 2006.

mandala in preparation for its construction. But more pointedly in the present context, it also refers to the identification of geomantic features of the locale, which, as we saw above, Lha btsun and his disciples were attempting to decipher based on the pilgrimage guides. In both metaphorical and concrete ways, the vision thus described encapsulates the idea of the fluidity between person, sociality, and landscape. This dynamic points to the notion proposed by Marilyn Strathern for the Melanesian context, namely, that persons can contain a generalized sociality within.

Finally, I would like to cite here one last passage. It refers to a vision that Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med had of bKra shis sdings at the end of his journey. In this we have an even more direct connection being traced between the guru and the land. As he says:

At that time, I saw the three big valleys, the 125 minor valleys, the 104 great lakes, the five treasury glaciers at the top end of the valleys, and the jewel bowl at the bottom end of the valleys—all of the places surrounding the navel of bKra shis sdings I saw directly with my eyes. At that time, I had the ecstasy of thinking that I was experiencing my own luminosity. And reflecting on the kindness of Padmasambhava, I fervently recollected Padmasambhava and supplicated him at that sacred place with longing.²²

The visual sense enhanced by the description of the environment provided by the lama, which gave rise to the collective vision, seems to be the point of inflection here, at once multiplying reality and making explicit the connections between the various bodies—of guru and disciples—and the landscape—in particular, when it is described as being homologous to the human body on the secret level. Through vision the body of the guru becomes the place where a relationship is established with the hidden land. If the land has a potentially transformative effect on him and his disciples, the land itself is also transformed through the guru's activities, be they actual performances of rituals that open the land and connect guru and disciples with it, or his action of narrativizing its invisible qualities. Hence, in the process of revealing the hidden land (and also through visionary activity), Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med potentially impacts the sense of self of his disciples, creating at the same time a new sense of reality and sociality for them.

²² Ibid., 612.6–613.3: *de'i tshe lung chen gsum/ lung phran brgya dang nyer lnga/ mtsho chen brgya dang bzhi/ phu gangs chen mdzod lnga/ mda' rin chen gshong / lte ba bkra shis brag gi 'khor yug gi gnas rnams mig gis mngon sum du mthong stel slar yang rang gi 'od myong bsam pa'i dga' spro dang / padma 'byung gnas ki bka' drin la bsam pas o rgyan rje nyid bzod blag med par dran tel gnas der gdung bas gsol ba btob pa ni/*

Part 2. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard

In this section of the paper, I go forward more than 350 years in time to focus my discussion on four different laboratory experiments with advanced meditators. I believe the investigation of these experiments can shed light on the ways that the guru expands our understanding of ourselves, and general notions of what it means to be human. As we shall see, in contrast with Lha btsun's narrative, which was presented as directly connected to a particular land and to particular disciples, these experiments have more of a universalistic proclivity. This is explained by different factors. The first one I would like to highlight here is the direct role of the Dalai Lama in fostering these experiments.

As I have shown in my previous work (2015) and as some of the evidence discussed below will reiterate, the nature of the Dalai Lama's activities tends to be comprehensive, going well beyond his own cultural sphere. Hence, his participation in these experiments carries with it this universalistic sense. A second factor consists in the laboratory and scientists acting as mediators. As Michel Callon states, laboratories perform a key function in our societies, having the potential to continuously rebuild them by introducing "unpredictable variations and new associations."²³ This creative power of the laboratories is in fact revolutionary in the sense that it can engender pervasive cultural changes. A case in point is the recent broad application of contemplative practices in contexts as diverse as medicine, psychology, education, business management, and so forth. As I will try to show below, the sense of self, or person that emerges from this "most sacred chamber of science"²⁴ has the potential to effectively change the general perception we have of ourselves as human beings.

The experiments I will discuss here directly derived from the VIIIth Mind and Life dialogue, which happened in Dharamsala in the year 2000. This particular Mind and Life dialogue had destructive emotions as its theme and represented an important turning point in the history of the Institute. Since the late 1980s Mind and Life has promoted the most important and perennial series of encounters between scientists and representatives of Buddhist traditions. The particular dialogue undertaken in Dharamsala in 2000 is a significant landmark in the history of this institute. It led to the development of lines of research that consequently would be carried out in scientific laboratories in the United States, taking the interaction between Buddhism and science to

²³ Callon 1986: 21.

²⁴ Baert and Rubio 2009: 72.

a whole new level. All the experiments discussed here happened within one or two years of this dialogue.

The idea to scientifically research destructive emotions is connected to a much broader project that the Dalai Lama holds as particularly important, namely, the promotion of ethical and spiritual values as a way to change the world. This is the subject matter of one of the Dalai Lama's bestselling books, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999). In this work, the Dalai Lama does not make explicit references to Buddhism. Instead, he frames basic Buddhist precepts in terms of secular ethics. It was Daniel Goleman, the celebrated author of the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), who after reading a draft of *Ethics for the New Millennium* first foresaw the relevance of his then current research on emotions for the Dalai Lama's project. The Dalai Lama immediately endorsed Goleman's view and suggested that a scientific perspective on what Buddhists call the three poisons—hatred, craving, and delusion—should be developed. Goleman and the Dalai Lama agreed that here “the Western view would differ from the Buddhist perspective, but that those differences would themselves be informative.”²⁵

In my book,²⁶ I discuss the interactions between Tibetan Buddhist representatives and scientists in terms of what I call “dialogue zones.” These zones are specialized niches of activities related not only to scientific practices, but also to world peace, the environment, academic traditions, and so forth. In my work, I focused in particular on the possibility these zones represent for the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the religious sphere. Among other things, I proposed that activities in these dialogue zones helped ground Tibetan Buddhist traditions in a globalized world through the formation of new transnational networks that connect lamas, monks, disciples, political activists, religious personalities, university professors, and scientists, among others. The central position that the Dalai Lama occupies in the religious field of Tibetan Buddhism makes him a privileged agent both in the opening of new dialogue zones and in the exploration and expansion of zones previously opened by other lamas, or by practitioners of other Buddhist traditions. Even though the Dalai Lama is actively present in all the dialogue zones I examine in my book, his role as a cultural innovator is most pronounced in his activities with Mind and Life. The Dalai Lama has been playing a crucial role on all levels of this institute's activities—from promoting its visibility through his own charisma and political import to directly suggesting possible avenues of research in the scientific field. In what

²⁵ Goleman 2003: XIX.

²⁶ Lopes 2015.

follows I will briefly sketch some of the procedures and results of these experiments to then conclude with a comparison with the previous section.

2.1 Cultural translation

The first experiment that I will discuss took place in 2001 at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience²⁷ on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. The professor of psychology and psychiatry Richard Davidson, one of the participants in the 2000 Mind and Life dialogue and the head of this laboratory conducted a series of experiments on an advanced Western Tibetan Buddhist meditator as part of the preparation to pilot a series of brain tests to be used with advanced meditators the following year.

In the book *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (2003), Daniel Goleman narrates the 2000 encounter in Dharamsala. He introduces this meditator under the fictitious name of "Lama Öser." Later, Matthieu Ricard revealed in one of his books that he was Lama Öser, the first "guinea pig," in his words.²⁸ Davidson tested Ricard with the help of two different technologies: electroencephalograms, or EEG, that record changes in the brain's electrical patterns with a very accurate time resolution; and functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, which measures the blood flow in the brain.

This pioneering experiment was quite revolutionary. In *Destructive Emotions*, Daniel Goleman describes it as "the first scientific experiment with someone at Öser's level of training, using such sophisticated measures."²⁹

The protocol developed by Davidson and his team with the help of Matthieu Ricard proposed an alternation between neutral states of mind and specific states of meditation. Ricard himself explains that "among the various states that were initially tested, four were chosen as the objects of further research: the meditation on 'altruistic love and compassion,' on 'focused attention,' on 'open presence,' and on the 'visualization' of mental images."³⁰

The focus of the discussion in this chapter was the meditation on altruistic love and compassion. Goleman explains that the EEG analysis bore "particularly rich fruit in the comparison between Öser

²⁷ This laboratory has since been expanded to the Waisman Center. In 2008, the Center for Healthy Minds was founded at the Waisman Center.

²⁸ Ricard 2006: 189.

²⁹ Goleman 2003: 3.

³⁰ Ricard 2006: 189–190.

at rest and while meditating on compassion.”³¹ There was, in the words of Goleman, “a dramatic increase in key electrical activity known as gamma in the left middle frontal gyrus, a zone of the brain Davidson’s previous research had pinpointed as a locus for positive emotions.”³² As he explains, in previous research with almost two hundred people, Davidson had found that “when people have high levels of such brain activity in that specific site of the left prefrontal cortex, they simultaneously report feelings such as happiness, enthusiasm, joy, high energy and alertness.”³³

A year later it was Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche’s turn to be part of research conducted by Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz, a neuroscientist trained by Francisco Varela, the co-founder of Mind and Life who passed away in 2001. Mingyur Rinpoche and seven other meditators’ brains were tested through similar procedures in Wisconsin. Daniel Goleman in his foreword to Mingyur Rinpoche’s book *Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness* (2007) describes the “stunning” results yielded by the research on the meditation on compassion. Mingyur Rinpoche’s “neural activity in a key center in the brain’s system for happiness jumped by 700 to 800 percent! For ordinary subjects in the study, volunteers who had just begun to meditate, that same area increased its activity by a mere 10 to 15 percent.”³⁴ Even though claims like these are problematic in many respects, they are nevertheless emblematic of the rhetoric deployed in a more popular, non-scientific sphere, and this is the sphere that mainly concerns us here.

2.2 *The happiest person in the world*

The exceptional results of Matthieu Ricard granted him the curious title of “the happiest person in the world.”³⁵ Both Matthieu Ricard and Mingyur Rinpoche would later interpret further their own experience

³¹ Goleman 2003: 12.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Goleman 2007: viii.

³⁵ In his blog, Matthieu Ricard explains how he became known by the curious epithet “The Happiest Person of the World,” a “joke” he says he has a hard time freeing himself from. In his words, “Some years ago the Australian television network ABC made a documentary on happiness, in which I participated. At one point the commentator said, ‘here is perhaps the happiest person in the world.’ Things remained quiet for a while, but a few years later the English newspaper *The Independent* published a cover story entitled ‘The happiest person in the world.’ From then on, things went out of control.” “The happiest person in the world?” <https://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/the-happiest-person-in-the-world>, last accessed March 1 2019.

in the laboratory with scientists in the format of two Dharma books that emphasize the connection between meditation and happiness. As in the case of the book *Destructive Emotions*, both books—*Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (2006) by Matthieu Ricard and *The Joy of Living* by Mingyur Rinpoche—translated into more accessible language the scientific results discovered in the laboratories and interpreted by scholars in papers published in scientific journals.

In a schematic and by no means exhaustive way, it is possible to detect in the sequence just described a series of translations. Mingyur Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard's extensive meditative experience, which was more than once compared by Goleman to the levels of practice typical of Olympic athletes, was "captured" and "translated" through state-of-the-art technology into images that could be interpreted by scientists; on another level of translation, the scientific language that analyzed the results was encapsulated by the pop culture formula "the happiest person in the world;" finally, both Matthieu Ricard and Mingyur Rinpoche absorbed the scientific results and language and so forth into modern Dharma books.

These processes of translation have created a new understanding of Buddhism and meditation that has allowed for broader communication in contemporary societies. Among other things, it is possible to detect in these translations a movement from a more subjective apprehension and description of the experience of meditation to an objective apprehension of this experience. In other words, we see a shift from the traditional framework to a scientific explanatory model. Curiously, it was this process of turning to a more objective take on meditation that led to the highly "speculative" idea of a person that is the happiest in the world! A simple google search on the phrase "the happiest person in the world" brings images of Matthieu Ricard and sometimes also of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche with electrodes all over their heads. These images, a perfect expression of the combination of subjectivity and objectivity involved in scientific experiments on the practice of meditation, point out the hybrid nature that these great meditation practitioners have acquired in the popular imagination. Not far removed from Donna Haraway's cyborgs,³⁶ they have become an unexpected combination of nature, culture, and technology.

Two other experiments have added supplementary layers to these hybrid images. Eminent psychologist Paul Ekman, one of the foremost experts on facial expression and another participant in the 2000 Mind and Life meeting in Dharamsala was responsible for these other two experiments. At the Human Interaction Laboratory of the University

³⁶ Haraway 1991.

of California in San Francisco, he tested the ability of Matthieu Ricard and another experienced Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhist meditation traditions in recognizing what he calls “micro-expressions;” using a video that showed in very quick succession various facial expressions, he asked the two meditators to identify the emotions on display. Once more, in these experiments the findings were groundbreaking. Previously Ekman had tested five thousand subjects with the same video. These two meditators achieved results that were far better than all of them. In his words, “They do better than policemen, lawyers, psychiatrists, customs officials, judges – even Secret Service agents,”³⁷ the group that had proven before to be the most accurate.

In a second experiment conducted at his colleague Robert Levenson’s psychophysiology laboratory at the University of California in Berkeley, machines measured the capacity of Matthieu Ricard to repress what is known as the startle reflex. The startle reflex is one of the most primitive of human reflexes. It is an unconscious defense response to sudden or threatening stimuli, like the firing of a gun. In such situations of perceived threat, *all* people involuntarily contract the same five facial muscles instantaneously, especially around the eyes.

Matthieu Ricard was tested for his bodily movements and physiological reactions to a powerful detonation like a gunshot going off just beside the ear. He was asked to try to neutralize the involuntary strong reaction. According to Ekman’s previous findings, no one had been able to suppress this reflex entirely. “Not even elite police sharpshooters, who fire guns every day, can stop themselves from flinching.”³⁸ But Ricard was able to repress this impulse, making it almost disappear while he was doing a meditation he called “open presence.” Ricard also was tested while practicing one-pointedness meditation. “During one-pointedness meditation, instead of the inevitable jump, there was a decrease in Öser’s heart rate, blood pressure, and so on. On the other hand, his facial muscles did reflect a bit of the typical startle pattern; the movements “were very small, but they were present,”³⁹ Ekman observed.

³⁷ Goleman 2003: 14.

³⁸ Ricard 2006: 197.

³⁹ Goleman 2003: 17.

Final Considerations

From all these experiments emerges the figure of a Buddhist super human, an expression of human potential for a happy, balanced, stress-free, empathic life through, among other things, the enhancement and control of the emotions and the senses. Goleman attributes Ricard's exceptional response to the startle reflex test to his remarkable level of emotional equanimity: "Just such equanimity has been claimed in ancient texts as one of the fruits of these meditation practices."⁴⁰ The same could be said in relation to the effects of the meditation on compassion on the brain of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Furthermore, the test on the recognition of micro-expressions could also be seen as evidence that the visual sense together with attention have been improved through the practice of intensive meditation.

The development of better human beings is precisely what the Dalai Lama proposes with his idea of a secular ethics suitable for the world community. These experiments paved the way for expanding these ideas beyond the theoretical domain into a more practical, applied sphere. The discovery of these super humans by science also seems to be in tune with certain trends in psychology. As Richard Davidson reminds us in the book *Destructive Emotions*, "the American Psychological Association, which is the largest organization of psychologists in the world, about forty-five thousand psychologists, has launched an initiative called Positive Psychology to focus on human flourishing. They say that we have spent too much time focusing on negative traits and we now need to turn our attention to positive traits."⁴¹ The research on the effects of meditation seems to be a perfect response to at least some of the questions that this new trend in psychology might raise.

The exceptional results of these experiments echo the equally exceptional autobiographical account of Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, since both of these instances challenge reified notions of the self by expanding its boundaries. As we have seen, the expansion of the boundaries of the sense of self happens in these contexts through translation mechanisms that reveal what was hidden, subjective, private. In the case of Lha btsun, he himself performed that role through the means of ritual, enhancing the perception of the landscape, and visions—both individual and collective—thereby expanding the sense of self for his disciples. The guru, the disciples, the land and its invisible inhabitants are connected in new form of sociality.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 230.

In the case of the experiments, I would argue that it is mainly the scientist who plays that role, which I associated earlier with that of the shaman. They and their highly-sophisticated machines are the ones behind the translation of subjective states of meditation into images, numeric data, and analysis. It could be argued also that in our societies the scientists occupy one of the most prestigious positions in society—their word certainly tends to carry great weight.

Through scientists' expert mediation, the outstanding abilities of Yongey Rinpoche and Matthieu Ricard become apparent and "scientifically proven," even if they were just meant to be done in preparation for a pilot test, as was the case with Matthieu Ricard at the University of Wisconsin's Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience. The subsequent publicizing of these experiments by means of the general media—through popular science books, Dharma books, magazines, newspapers, etc.—had the direct effect of rendering their experience universally accessible in more than one sense of the expression. The tone of these publications is indeed a prescriptive one. If these great meditators are super human beings, their "super powers" were acquired through training, in a regimen not very different from Olympic athletes, Goleman would say. So at least in theory, anyone could aim to be like them, that is, regular human beings who have striven in meditation. This kind of identification does not seem too far from the doctrinal idea I mention above regarding the continuity between the mind of the guru and the mind of the disciple. Indeed, I would argue that there is something of that idea that, once gone through the laboratories and anointed by the secular project of the Dalai Lama, still remains, but in a different format. The sense of identification between the guru and the disciple, or the "lama in the lab" and the reader, seems to be an essential basis for change both in the more traditional context, and in the contemporary one. The guru is your mirror, so his or her attainments are within reach. In that sense, the guru can be said to be a crucial catalyst in the concept of the *plasticity of personhood*.

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