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.

James Gentry, "Tibetan religion and the senses", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 50, June 2019, pp. 5–12.

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, *stūpa*s, 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'Etudes 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 adbhidharma writings of the rNying ma scholar Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), the Madhayamaka 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 *Roṅ zom bka' 'bum: A Collection of Writings by Roṅ-zom Chos-kyi-bzaṅ-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, Gelegphu, 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.