

## Hearing Goddesses in Rivers: Contemplative Design and Religious Experience in the Great Perfection

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**S**itting next to a river on an early autumn day, the valley sloping, opening to mountains off in the distance, you listen to the rushing sounds of the water flowing swiftly across the rocks. You listen deeper, more intently, and the longer you listen, the more those sounds become music – the most beautiful music you’ve ever heard, as if a goddess was singing a sublime melody. Now you hear more goddesses playing flutes, lutes, zithers, and drums from all the five Buddha families. You begin to hear the order of transcendent reality resound for you.

Sound is a fundamental component of Tibetan Buddhism. It has a rich history of music in rituals, with specialized instruments, compositions, and chants, as well as in contemplative practices with mantra recitations and visualizations (or auralizations) that place mantric particles within divine worlds and the body’s interior. These are more than just incidental aesthetics – they are fundamental tools in how Tibetans have historically made and experienced religion. However, within Tibetan and Buddhist studies, these aural dimensions are often overlooked or relegated to supportive roles and lush backgrounds rather than focused on as primary makers of Tibetan religiosity. This is especially the case in the discussion of contemplation and religious experience in the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Much scholarly emphasis is placed (and justifiably so) on its unique philosophies, poetics, cognitive practices, and experiences described as either ineffable or visionary, yet Buddhist studies scholarship has largely not attuned to the roles of sound and hearing in the Great Perfection’s diverse locales, divinities, contemplations, and experiences.

We find a concentrated source of aural engagement within this tradition in a collection titled the *Seventeen Tantras (Rgyud bcu bdun)* of the Great Perfection’s Heart Quintessence (*Rdzogs chen snying thig*) tradition, specifically in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra (Sgra thal ’gyur)*.

Here, I will focus on a featured set of preliminary contemplative practices from that text and its 12<sup>th</sup> century commentary, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* (*Sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*), on the sounds of the elements (*'byung ba'i sgra*). In these aural contemplations, a Buddhist meditator goes out into the wilderness to focus on an array of natural sounds. It is an emblematic practice for this tantric tradition that heralds hearing as an important pathway for religious experience. It both opens our understandings of the rich aural world of the Great Perfection and problematizes academic conceptions of Great Perfection sensory models which tend to focus primarily on vision.

I argue that the sense of hearing is being employed in this textual tradition to produce innovative pathways for religious experience and attainment in 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Buddhism. The tradition both crafts contemplative practices and spaces for listening to the elements and establishes frameworks for the interpretation of such practice wherein heard sounds become transcendent and felt sensations are indications of physical transformation and spiritual awakening. It is through the combination of these factors that I contend the contemplative practices in this tantra and its commentary reveal new understandings of Tibetan Buddhist sensory models in which both hearing and the sounds of our environment are valued as a path towards awakening.

In this article, I will thus explore the ways the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and its commentary produce pathways for religious experience by breaking down the process into two core concerns found in the texts: contemplative design – the organization of spaces, materials, bodies, and activities; and descriptions of experiences – the resulting physical, emotional, perceptual, cognitive, and transcendent experiences that arise during the course or as a result of contemplative practice.

I will demonstrate how the sense of hearing suffuses and connects both the design of these practices and their experiences for this tradition, used both as a central focal point for the contemplative design as well as the primary medium of the resulting experiences. I will also discuss three other themes that are centered in these listening practices – environments, bodies, and socialization. Considering each of these themes in turn can help us identify and understand core concerns of the tradition.

Finally, I will offer concluding reflections on this tradition's logic concerning the process of religious experience. I will discuss the place of the aural in contemplative practices of the Great Perfection, arguing that while the visual remains a major focus for much of Tibetan Buddhism's sensory practices, these aural practices provide new ways of understanding the Great Perfection's sensory model at this time and

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alternate ways they engaged with contemplation and religious experience. Further, I find that such aural encounters in this tradition are not merely productive of untethered experiences but are framed as transformative or liberative – revealing transcendent reality from amidst the mundane appearances of our world. Last, I propose that such religious experiences occur through the relationship of aural experience and Great Perfection ideological frameworks of cosmogony, cosmology, and agency, forming interpretive frameworks for the production of specifically religious experiences.

### 1. *Sound and Sight in the Great Perfection*

The Great Perfection is often traditionally presented as the highest textual and practice-oriented tradition of the *Rnying ma*, or ‘Ancient,’ school of Tibetan Buddhism. In the Tibetan Renaissance of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries, we see an incredible textual output from this tradition featuring the *Seventeen Tantras* as the core of the *Experiential Precepts* class (*Man ngag sde*) of the Great Perfection, including the *Unimpeded Sound*.<sup>1</sup> This tradition values spontaneity and natural liberation over effortful and controlled practices. This theme forms the basis for their ultimate view, namely that our world and ourselves are naturally free from the bonds of suffering – we are already naturally transcendent. The highest practice of the Great Perfection tradition has long been considered a set of visionary experiences called Direct Crossing (*thod rgal*), which is described elsewhere in this set of literature, and has been the focus of much theoretical and practical traditional commentary (as well as contemporary academic scholarship) since.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and its commentary, we find an increased range of sensory practices that feature hearing, taste, smell, and touch alongside visual models of practice. These texts spend particular time focusing on aural practices and sonic imaginations, detailing five ways sound “descends” (*babs so*) into our world to explain the word *Sound* in the tantra’s title. The tantra thus declares:

The expressions of sound (*sgra'i brjod pa*) are such that  
 [They] are an amazing wonder  
 Not explained in other tantras -  
 Listen to me through my elaborations.  
 The site of sound’s descent (*sgra'i babs so*) is fivefold:  
 Brahmā (*tshangs*), Viṣṇu (*khyab 'jug*), the [kala]pingka bird

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<sup>1</sup> Germano 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Hatchell 2014.

(*ping ka*),

The elements' sounds (*'byung ba'i sgra*), and the teacher's voice (*ston pa'i gsungs*).

The doctrines emerging (*'byung ba'i chos rnams*) via these five [sonic sources]

Are practiced (*spyad*) in a great play (*rol pa chen por*) at your pleasure (*ci dgar*).<sup>3</sup>

The commentary clarifies that each of these five descents of sound map onto a type of sound found in the world: Brahmā utters linguistic sounds, Viṣṇu creates numerical sounds, the kalapingka bird sings melodies, the elements resonate with material sounds, and the teacher's voice expresses doctrinal sounds.<sup>4</sup> These descents of sound into the world represent ways that beings are deluded into confusion, such as the way the sounds of language can substantiate conceptions of ourselves and our emotions, and the ways numbers can delude by delineating the world into pieces. However, listening and voicing these sounds in specific ways is also imagined as capable of revealing reality, such that listening to the sound of the teacher's voice can grant superhuman sensory capacities.<sup>5</sup>

From among these five sources of concealing and revealing sounds, the material sounds of the elements are privileged as the principal sonic pathway for religious experience and attainment. The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary indicates that there is a direct connection between the sounds of the exterior four elements, their resonance within human bodies, and humans' capacity to realize the gnosis of reality along with awakened bodies.

Now is the fifth subtopic, the presentation on closely planting the seed of the emanation body in reliance on the external locations of the sounds of the four elements. "Elements" is as follows: if we ask where they emerge, the characteristics of beings with awareness are made to emerge in dependence on inanimate material. [In other words,] the four elements of the

<sup>3</sup> "(Ka) Rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud" 2000: 18.4–6. I also use several other witnesses of the text for translations. Please refer to the bibliography for a list of the editions used. In citations, I will simply cite the page numbers used in the *Adzom* edition cited here. It will be referenced by its condensed title, "Sgra thal 'gyur." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 108.6–158.3. I will also be using several witnesses to the commentary in my translations. In the notes, I will cite the Tsering Gyatso edition of the text. Please refer to the other versions in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion of the sonic imagination of this text, please refer to my dissertation: Liddle 2023.

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internal body are made to emerge upon dependence on the four external elements. Thus, they are “emergent [or] elements” (*byung ba*). Since the primordial knowing of awareness is made to emerge in direct immediacy in dependence upon the four elements of the internal body, they are called “emergent [or] elements.” Since the fruit of Buddhahood emerges without hindrance in dependence on the immediacy of the direct perception of awareness, they are called “emergent [or] elements.”<sup>6</sup>

In this description that plays on the dual meaning of the Tibetan word *byung ba* as emergent or elements, the four elements of the material world are depicted as giving rise to the internal elements of humans. This enables them to realize primordial knowing of reality and thus (eventually) attain Buddhahood. The elements’ sounds are further related back to that reality through cosmogonical scenes elsewhere in which the “natural sound of reality” (*chos nyid kyi rang sgra*) expresses itself to create the elements which in turn materialize as the physical world and its sounds.<sup>7</sup> These elemental sounds are also constantly referenced throughout the other four descents of sound as important practices, including the assertion in the commentary that all the Buddhas of the three times attained enlightenment through the practice of listening to them.<sup>8</sup> Finally, they are also the only sounds that get taken up as a core preliminary practice for the text.

2. *Listening to the Sounds of the Elements*

In its twenty-fifth sermon of chapter one, the *Unimpeded Sound* features a set of four different preliminary contemplative practices, one for each of the natural elements of water, earth, fire, and wind.<sup>9</sup>

The stages for training on the three awakened bodies (*sku gsum*) prioritize the sensory qualities of the elements (*byung ba'i 'dod yon*).

<sup>6</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 144.1–4.

<sup>7</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 158.6–169.6.

<sup>8</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 149.1–5.

<sup>9</sup> While the *Unimpeded Sound* also uses a five-fold system of elements that includes space, for the purpose of sonic practice and elemental calculations, it largely omits this fifth element, explaining that it is “neuter and empty” (*ma ning stong pas*) and thus outside the purview of such practical engagement. “Sgra thal ‘gyur” 2000: 20.2.

Best [among these] are the sounds of earth, water, fire, and wind.

Via training on these, there will certainly be accomplishment.<sup>10</sup>

These are presented as sonic trainings on the three awakened bodies (*sku gsum*), through which one can accomplish their individual dynamic qualities (*yon tan*) such as the six super-knowledges and freedom from the harmful effects of the environmental elements.<sup>11</sup> The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary summarizes and clarifies these sounds, as the root text remains vague on their sources.

Those who wish for supreme accomplishments [should] train on the sound of earth in the [clacking of] round rocks (*sgong gi rnam pa*), the sound of water in the sound of a cleansing (*gshang ba'i sgra*) [river that flows] down a valley, the sound of fire in a mass of sandalwood flames (*tsan dan gyi me dpung*), and the sound of wind in a [mountain-top house] with windows in [all] directions (*phyogs kyi skar khung*).<sup>12</sup>

Each of these sounds reflect material and spatial considerations for contemplation, all of which will be more fully engaged in their individual sections detailed below. As a group, these mostly indicate a particularly intense form of the element – such as a speedy downhill river, a bonfire, or the wind at the top of a mountain – where the sound of it will be strong.<sup>13</sup> They are also all found in natural environments that are typically isolated from other people, a point the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary is eager to foreground.<sup>14</sup>

A practitioner chooses which sound to engage based on a set of elemental calculations that indicate the practitioner's elemental body

<sup>10</sup> "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.2–3.

<sup>11</sup> I.e., drowning in water, being impeded by earth, burning in fire, and being scattered by wind.

<sup>12</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 275.1–3.

<sup>13</sup> One exception to this is the sound of earth. Instead of an earthquake or rockslide, which would more likely be the most intense forms of earth's sounds, the commentary describes the clinking together of stones. Neither the tantra nor the commentary reflect on the reasons for this, indeed the sound of earth contains the least amount of description among the four practices. We may reflect that rock slides are too sporadic and dangerous to make for reliable sites of contemplation, and that stones better reflect the normal occurrence of earth's sounds, described in the tantra as "cool and heavy."

<sup>14</sup> This is one of the qualities the commentary lists for each of the four practices, and the only quality it gives for the practice on the sound of earth.

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type or constitution.<sup>15</sup> To this end, the tantra declares that “if a yogi’s [elemental] body [type] aligns with [the external element being practiced], there is no doubt they will accomplish [the practice].”<sup>16</sup> In this way, one’s interior elemental constitution is presented as a central factor in the efficacy of these contemplations.

In describing these elemental sound practices, the tantra provides one verse for each, beginning with water:

Within the cleansing (*bshang ba*) sound of water,  
[one can] apprehend (*'dzin*) the melodious sounds (*sgra dbyangs*) of the Sky-Dancer goddesses.  
If one makes this a constant habit (*rtag tu goms byas*),  
they will certainly accomplish even the emanation body.<sup>17</sup>

The tantra itself gives scant details on the practice. However, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary presents enough practical instructions about the contemplation for practitioners (and us) to better understand both its design and the experiences that arise during it. Thus, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* indicates:

If the yogi’s [elemental] constitution is water, [they should go] “to the cleansing sound of water,” indicating a well-formed southward-facing valley that slopes downward (*lung pa kha lhor lta ba/ rab tu gzugs la thur*) in which water flows down it fiercely (*chu drag po 'bab pa*) and the sound of water grows most intensely (*chu'i sgra mchog tu che bar song*) ... If the cleansing sound of water is particularly strong (*rab tu gshang na*), various activities will be accomplished.<sup>18</sup>

For further clarification, the commentary also directs readers to another text, the *Conch Letters* commentary,<sup>19</sup> which outlines the

<sup>15</sup> This can be understood in similar ways to Indian, Chinese, or Western astrological calculations, where one’s date of birth and time in the calendrical cycle have an effect on their physical body and what courses of action they should take. However, instead of basing these calculations on the movement of the stars, these are based on regular changes in the elemental makeup of the world, a subject the text deals with extensively. Elemental constitution types such as a fire constitution or a water constitution describe the makeup of a person based on these calculations. Methods for understanding one’s elemental constitution and the complex of factors, sub-types, and related effects are found throughout the text. For a more complete account of these calculations, see Zuckerman 2024.

<sup>16</sup> “Sgra thal ’gyur” 2000: 55.1–2.

<sup>17</sup> “Sgra thal ’gyur” 2000: 54.3–4.

<sup>18</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 275.4–6.

<sup>19</sup> *The Conch Letters* (*dung yig can*) is a part of the cycle, *the Heart Quintessence of Vimalamitra* (*bi ma snying thig*) and is referenced by the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*

practice and provides detail for several sonic, environmental, and physical factors:

In the late autumn, when the grains have been harvested, the yogi who practices on the sound of water should perform preliminary practices and then [go] to an empty valley in which a fierce river flows downwards with extremely powerful waves and the rushing sound of “shwa.” It is key that their body is in a squatting position with the ankles parallel, that their awareness is focused on the center of the river, and that their eyes should not move around, looking out with the elephant gaze. They [should] meditate in this way for one month... continuously listening to the sound of water.<sup>20</sup>

With both of these commentarial exegeses, we can begin to reconstruct the contemplative apparatus to which the tantra gestures. The practice of listening to the sound of water should be performed alone in a river-valley that slopes down off the mountain and opens towards the south. This description would entail a variety of practical consequences, such as the speed and strength of the river as it flows down (as opposed to a possibly slower river on flat ground), and the amount of light and heat that a practitioner would get with the sun coming in from the open South. The designers clearly want a strong river, likely to generate the most sound possible. In both commentaries, the strength of the sound is foregrounded, as its ability to confer more attainments. The specific sound is indicated also by the onomatopoeia, “shwa,” again suggesting a rush rather than a babble.

The practitioner’s activities are also outlined in the *Conch Letters*. There are instructions for their bodies, which should remain squat, their vision, which should stay steady (possibly on the river), and their auditory awareness, which is cast into the center of the sound’s source. Instructions for the other sounds generally keep these three concerns, though awareness (*rig pa*) is sometimes replaced by ear consciousness (*rna ba’i rnam shes*), which too is cast into the center of the elemental sounds. Finally, a time parameter is set. While this quote indicates one month, that is only for the initial set of experiences to arise. The total practice takes two and a half months.

The other three listening practices are similarly described in the tantra.

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as a source for further details around this practice. *The Conch Letters* does not contain a full explanation of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, though notably focuses on these aural practices of the sounds of the elements.

<sup>20</sup> Bi ma la mi tra 2009a.



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The sound of earth is cool and heavy (*bsil zhing lji*)<sup>21</sup>.  
 It possesses the voice of Great Brahmā.  
 If one constantly listens to this,  
 They will certainly accomplish the complete enjoyment body.

Training on the lengthening (*ring byed*) sound of fire  
 Reveals the melodious speech of Great Viṣṇu.  
 Whoever listens to this,  
 Will certainly attain the dynamic qualities of the reality body.

The sound of wind is oppressive and fierce (*gzir zhing drag*).  
 [It reveals] the connecting speech of *khyung* birds.  
 If one understands this [properly though its] constant  
 recitation,  
 One will train on [that which is] common to the three  
 awakened bodies.<sup>22</sup>

The first line of each verse details the sound to which one listens to the cool and heavy knocking of earth, the ever-lengthening roar of fire, and the overwhelming whistles of wind. In this way, practitioners with different elemental constitutions are instructed to practice on their respective sounds. The *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary further explains that a person with an earth constitution should go to an extremely isolated place and acquire rocks the size of eggs (*sa'i sgo nga*), listening to the noise as they strike them with their hand or manually hit them together (*lag pa'i 'du byed*) for seventeen months.<sup>23</sup> A practitioner with a fire constitution will go to a sandalwood forest, collect several dozen large logs,<sup>24</sup> and start a raging bonfire, listening to its roar for twenty months.<sup>25</sup> Finally, a person whose primary constitution is wind will climb to the top of a mountain, to a house that is open on all sides (*phyogs kyi skar khung*), and listen to the wind whistle and whip around them for sixteen months.<sup>26</sup>

Each of these practices unfolds into unique experiences for their listeners. The descriptions of these experiences, while multi-sensorial

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary takes these as experiences where one's body turns cool and their mind becomes heavy when listening to the sound of earth, as opposed to descriptors of the sound itself. Parsing between the intention of the tantra and the commentary's interpretation of it is often a challenge in between these texts.

<sup>22</sup> "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.4–6.

<sup>23</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 278.2–280.6.

<sup>24</sup> The exact number is based on their age.

<sup>25</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 280.6–283.6.

<sup>26</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 283.6–286.1.

at times with tactile, visual, and even olfactory experiences, are most directly focused on the transcendent aural experiences that arise from listening to the mundane environmental sounds. The root verses describe the experience of listening to water: "Within the cleansing sound of water, [one can] apprehend the melodious sounds of the Sky-Dancer goddesses."<sup>27</sup> In the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* commentary, it describes such aural experiences as the culminating experience of the listening practice, though several other-sensory experiences are given along the way:

In the first month, there will appear (*snang*) various sounds of water and [the practitioner will] feel agitation in their body's elements. Then, there will appear snippets of Brahmā's clear voice (*tshang pa'i skad kyi gdangs 'ga'*), followed by guttural and unarticulated ghostly speech (*'dre'i skad lce dang mchus ma bsgyur pa dag*), an occasional eagle's screech (*nam mkha' lding gi skad*) of "ka hring," and Indra's speech (*brgya byin gyi skad*) of "prati dreng" will resound (*grags par 'gyur*). After another half-month, there will emerge resounding calls (*grags pa dag 'byung*) of ordinary beings of the six realms [crying] "di ri ri!" A half-month later, the beautiful sounds of the kalapingka bird resounding in particularly melodious ways (*ka la ping ka'i sgra rab tu dbyang kyis snyan pa dag*) will emerge. Then, in another half-month, there will be [the melodious] sounds of the [five] sky-dancer goddesses... which sound [respectively] like a *piwang* lute (*pi wang*), a flute (*gling bu*), a zither (*drwa ba*), a clay drum (*rdza rgna*), and refined [singing] (*'phra ma'i lta bu'i sgra*).<sup>28</sup>

The commentary presents a timeline of aural and other-sensory experiences that arise from listening to the sound of water in the ways presented previously. These include a variety of deities' voices, suffering cries of beings in different realms, and the musical tones of the Sky-Dancer goddesses. The experience of listening to these goddesses' melodies are examined in further detail by the commentary, which aligns with the tantra's presentation of them as the major experiences of listening to water.

Then in half a month, the first sound of the Sky Dancer goddesses will resound, "Bhuddha Dakkini Dharma Kasu" in long tones (*rab tu ring bar grags*). Then, one will hear (*thos pa*)

<sup>27</sup> "Sgra thal 'gyur" 2000: 54.3.

<sup>28</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 276.1–277.4

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[the goddess'] own melody (*de nyid kyi dbyangs*) which [sounds] extremely tormented, refined, subtle, and clear (*rab tu gdung ba dang/ bsing ba dang/ 'phra zhing gdangs pa*). Thus, even the body will tremble and [that trembling will] speed up (*'dar zhing rings pa*). One will start to feel intoxicated (*myos pa'i nyams*). Then, they will lose feeling in their body (*reg 'joms kyi myong ba*)....

Upon hearing these resound, they will experience them as bliss, great bliss, and utter bliss (*sgra grags pa dag thos pa'i tse na/ bde ba dang/ bde ba chen po dang/ rab tu bde ba la spyod*). If the yogi constantly familiarizes themselves with these kinds of sounds, they will accomplish the authentic dynamic qualities of the emanation body.<sup>29</sup>

Each of the goddesses of the five Buddha families is represented in turn. They all pronounce their family membership in Sanskritized phrases as the Awakened, Adamantine, Jewel, Lotus, and Action Sky-Dancers.<sup>30</sup> Each is presented in a small section, though the Awakened family goddess detailed in this passage is given the most description. Her musical instrument is her voice, which is described using a variety of intonation markers such as tormented and refined. The other four goddesses express sounds like musical instruments: a *piwang* lute, a flute, a zither, and a drum.

Hearing these melodies leads to other kinds of feelings, such as trembling, intoxication, numbness, and bliss. Ultimately, though, the commentary indicates that listening to these sounds leads to attainment of the dynamic qualities of the emanation body, the first of the awakened bodies of the Buddha. A primary quality noted by the commentary relates to the element to which the practitioner is listening. For the sound of water, this entails becoming constantly buoyant in water and never drowning. Thus, one's spiritual and physical body transform throughout this process.

Similarly, listening to the other elements evokes a wide range of transcendent aural and physical experiences. Listening to the clinking of earth's stones primarily manifests experiences of Brahmā's voice and the six distinctive cries of beings in different Buddhist realms, such as the injured screams of hell beings (*sdug bsngal reg ldan zhes bya ba'i*

<sup>29</sup> Tshe ring rgya mtsho 2009: 276.4–277.5.

<sup>30</sup> It is not clear if these are meaningful Sanskrit phrases. Some appear to be, while others seem inscrutable. However, their names, arguably the most recognizable and significant portion of their utterances, are all the Sanskrit names of the five Buddha families. Here they are as they appear in their Tibetan transliterated forms: *Bhuddha Ḍakkini Dharma Kasu, Badzra Ḍakkini Ngadu Puka Ho, Ratna Ḍakkini Mahā Dhara Ho, Padma Ḍakkini Jñāna Dharma Suka Dhara, Karmā Ḍakki Adma Krama Sarnya.*

*sgra*), tormented wails of ghosts (*sgra rab tu gdung byed*), confused grunts of animals (*sgra myogs spyod*), and the blissful but guarded tones of gods (*skad bde skyob*). In addition, the body cools, one undergoes a physical transformation whereby they can bore underground (*sa la 'dzul bar nus*), relating to the element of earth, and they attain other qualities of the enjoyment body – the second member of the trio of awakened bodies.

The fire's roar causes one's body to shake and levitate while bliss spreads through it. A practitioner begins to hear transcendent sounds of Viṣṇu's voice (*khyab 'jug chen po'i gsung*) and the fierce sounds of demons and wrathful goddesses (*mkha' 'gro ma sdigs 'byin pa'i sgra*). In the end, their body becomes immune to being burned (*mes mi 'tshig pa*) and they can control the element<sup>31</sup> as a part of the transcendent transformation whereby they attain the qualities of the reality body – the third awakened body.

Finally, via listening to the whistling sound (*shu sgra*) of the wind, one's mind and body become uneasy, with goosebumps, crawling skin, and shaking limbs (*khamns 'khrugs cing phung po skyi zing byed pa dag*). From the whistles of the wind there emerge the unifying<sup>32</sup> sounds of the King of Birds (*mkha' lding rgyal po'i sbyor ba'i gsung*), a kalapingka bird calling "ung ung ung" and "yam yam yam," the latter a mantric particle associated with the torrential destruction of wind. Here, the dynamic qualities common to all three awakened bodies are described as becoming complete (*sku gsum ka'i thun mong gi yon tan rdzogs*).

### 3. *Design and Experience in the Unimpeded Sound Tantra*

By examining the contemplative design and resultant experiences for each elemental listening practice in these ways, we can begin to understand the categories with which these texts are constructing this set of practices. We find their contemplative design focused on an interaction between two major categories: environments and humans. Environments are broken down into their landscape components, their attributes, the season, and any material objects, either present in the locale or brought along. Water's landscape is a southern-sloping river-

<sup>31</sup> This is glossed elsewhere as being able to burn anything one touches and to internally heat up enough to destroy anything harmful within the body.

<sup>32</sup> This is a difficult term to translate. The Tibetan is *sbyor ba*, which can mean to unite. This section discusses the attainment of the qualities that are common to all three awakened bodies and later describes sounds from the kalapingka related to the individual elements. I have taken this to indicate that the kalapingka bird is uniting the different elements and awakened bodies in their call.

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valley in winter or late-autumn,<sup>33</sup> fire is listened to in a sandalwood forest in the summer, earth's locale is an isolated place in spring, and wind's is the top of a mountain with an open-air hut in the fall. Items can include proper food, cloth to wrap your head up when the sounds of water cause agitation, egg-shaped stones, and human-sized logs of sandalwood to burn in a bonfire. The final, and arguably most important component of environments for these practices is their soundscapes. These are given using descriptors, such as "fierce" water, and onomatopoeic syllables (e.g., the wind goes 'shu' and the water goes 'shwa'). At times, the commentaries give more clear descriptions regarding dynamics, timbre, and length (e.g., the sound of the fire grows louder and longer in duration as one listens to it).

Humans are discussed in terms of their body's primary elemental constitution and their activities – what do they do in this space both physically and with their aural attention, and for how long. For all the sonic contemplations, practitioners are required to have certain characteristics, such as faith in the Buddhist doctrine, and need to make offerings to a teacher. During the actual listening portions of the practice, the designed activities then diverge according to the different elemental constitutions they possess and sounds to which they listen. A person with a water constitution needs to squat near the river and focus their mind and hearing faculty on the center of that river for up to two and a half months. Those with an earth constitution find egg-shaped stones and strike them together in their hands, listening to the sound of earth hitting together for fifteen months. Fire individuals find logs as big as their body and construct a bonfire, listening to its sound for fourteen months. Finally, wind constituted people sit and listen to strong winds whip and whistle around them, relying on hearty meat, butter, and brown sugar to see them through.

It is important to note here that these two broad categories, environments and humans, are deeply related for the *Unimpeded Sound* and its main commentary. To optimize results, a person must line up their body and activity with the environment, such that only a wind constituted person should go to the top of the mountain to listen to the wind. It is through this designed relationship between humans and environments that transcendent experiences arise.

Experiences can be broken down into several categories: physical reactions, perceptions, cognitions, social experiences, and existential or transcendental insights.<sup>34</sup> Physical reactions in these practices are

<sup>33</sup> While the tantra identifies winter as the season of water, this is described as "late autumn" in the *Conch Letters* commentary, which further clarifies this as right at the end of autumn, closer to the winter solstice, though these are potentially quite far apart.

<sup>34</sup> This classification system is based on one found in Gabrielsson 2010.

sometimes physiological, including trembling, numbness, cooling, heating, goosebumps, crawling skin, and shaking limbs. Alternately, they can be quasi-physical feelings of intoxication, floating, and bliss. A final physical category of experience is the promised outcomes of physical transformations related to the elements themselves, such as always floating in water, being able to bore through solid rock, and burning anything one touches. Perceptions deal with the preceptory experiences that *arise from* listening to the elements.<sup>35</sup> These experiences are mostly auditory, but there are also visual, tactile, and even olfactory perceptual experiences. Cognitions deal with the arising thoughts or associations made in conjunction with the listening practice. Here we find an association of experiences with a Buddhist world ordering, including types of beings, divinities, and so forth. Social experiences here can be seen in terms of community building with cosmological orderings, placing one within a larger Buddhist world of beings, both suffering mundane beings of the six Buddhist realms and transcendent divine beings such as the goddesses of the five Buddha families. Existential experiences deal with the nature of the world, seen here in terms of the six realms of the mundane Buddhist cosmology, while transcendent experiences go beyond this mundane world, revealing the sounds of divine realms and granting one realization of the three awakened bodies.

#### 4. *Themes Connecting Design and Experience*

When considered in conjunction, these understandings of the typologies for both design and experience, the input and output of this practice, will give us purchase to interpret how and on what levels this textual tradition is producing pathways for religious experience and attainment. This pairing can help us reconstruct both important themes that arise throughout this practice literature and the tradition's theoretical view of the contemplative process more generally. I will begin with the former and discuss four themes I find active in these practices, moving between their designs and experiences – hearing, environments, bodies, and social organizations. Reflections on these themes can help provide insight into the broader theories of religious experience at work in this contemplative tradition.

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<sup>35</sup> Meaning that the mundane sounds of the elements are not included in this category. The assumed conditions of the practice for the text include sounds heard in the environment. They are more concerned then with how those sounds give way to, or manifest, other types of sounds or sensory experiences, often transmundane ones – sounds or experiences not generally perceived under normal conditions.

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This first theme is the most obvious for this context, but it is certainly not a given. Both the design and experiential elements of this practice operate on a sensory level, in particular an aural one. The practitioner is told to listen to the sounds of the material elements at the beginning of the practice and is given detailed instructions in what to listen for, how to listen, and for how long. The intent here is a total and sustained immersion into specified auditory worlds, making up the core of the practice. This engagement with the aural sphere is receptive listening as opposed to active recitation (found elsewhere in the text and in other tantric Buddhist contexts such as in mantra chanting).<sup>36</sup>

This listening to the mundane and material world then gives way to transcendent aural experiences where they hear the voices and music of other realms of beings and divinities. The five goddesses of the Buddha families perform sublime music with a variety of instruments, their melodies heard as beautiful, haunting, and refined. But these sounds can be harrowing as well, such as the suffering cries of beings or the terrifying screams of wrathful goddesses. Each of the four listening practices offers their unique transcendent soundscapes with a signature voice that recalls the remaining four transcendent sounds of the tantra's five-part sonic typology – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, and the teacher, heard here as the goddesses of the five Buddha families.

Environments comprise the second theme. The design of the practice indicates what the material natural environment should be. One is either in a river-valley, an isolated rocky terrain, a forest, or a mountain. These places are indicated both by their landscapes and their soundscapes. The landscape types are given descriptions that are both detailed, such as the shape and direction of a river valley, and general, such as an isolated place. This gives enough instruction to normalize the possible environmental interactions, while keeping it open enough so that practitioners might actually find proper locales. They also describe the location based on certain materials that need to be present, such as stones or sandalwood. In addition, the soundscapes are prescribed with details of required sounds, such as whistling sounds of the wind or a strong enough rush of the water. Thinking with the tradition's elemental theory explained in the tantra's descriptions of the five descents of sound, these material and aural environments are manifestations of elemental templates that resounded from the natural sound of reality – the elements and their sounds are at the core of the material environment. By going to places

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<sup>36</sup> For a more robust distinction between these two forms of listening and their ramifications, see Liddle 2023.

that specifically showcase these elemental sounds, that sonic-elemental cosmogony is echoed. Thus, the placement of practitioners in such landscapes and soundscapes that are paradigmatic of the material world and its cosmogony and heightens the relevance of the environment to the contemplations on sound.

When experiences then arise, new environments are signaled by the changing of soundscapes from natural and mundane to transcendent, melodic, and frightening in ways as outlined above. The deeper one listens to the soundscapes that comprise their mundane natural environments, the more they give way to these transcendent soundscapes that surround them. Visual and spatial descriptions of environments drop off here, but through the language of soundscapes, the texts make evident how one's environment is not the same. A practitioner's relationship with the elements of the natural world also changes. As their body undergoes transformations, they no longer need to fear elemental dangers such as drowning or burning. Indeed, they can now control fire, fly, and burrow through stone with ease. They have at once transcended the limits placed by harsh environments and taken upon themselves their qualities, such that the boundaries between their environments and their bodies become malleable.

These transformations lead into the third theme – bodies. The designs of these practices are explicit about what types of bodies are required for each practice. To engage with the fire listening practice, for example, you need a fire constitution, which the tantra and commentary help you determine through their sets of elemental calculations. This is not an arbitrary connection. Rather, the commentary describes human bodies as emerging from the external elements and their sounds. The duo of the body and environment are thus fundamentally paired and implicitly described as a causative basis for the elements' sonic effects on practitioners. Bodies are further implicated in the design for the practice with specific instructions for postures and eye movements, relationships to material aspects of the practice including building a fire with logs as big as one's body and moving stones around in one's hands, and prescriptions for resolving complications in practice, such as laying down with one's head wrapped in cloth if they get agitated while listening to water. In this way, we find that bodies are central to the consideration and fulfillment of each of these listening practices.

By performing the contemplations, one experiences a variety of physical sensations. These include agitation, goosebumps, numbness, trembling, shaking limbs, cooling, and heating. They also feel quasi-physical experiences such as intoxication, floating, and bliss. In addition, the theme of bodies extends to metaphors of the three



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spiritual bodies and their associated physicalities and realizations. A practitioner will attain the qualities of the emanation body with the sound of water, the enjoyment body with earth, the reality body with fire, and the qualities of all three with wind. Not only do these represent spiritual attainments central to the tantric path, but they also come with transformative effects for the body discussed above, whereby one attains physical mastery over the elements.

Finally, fourth is a social theme engaging community or isolation. The designs are clear about the need for social isolation when performing these listening practices. Indeed, the only real environmental description for the practice on the sound of earth is an isolated place. While some preliminary stages in the practices mention receiving teachings from, or making offerings to, teachers, all the descriptions indicate that a practitioner should enter these sonic environments alone and away from all others.

In contrast, the experiential worlds that emerge from these sonic practices are highly social. One is set among the beings of the other realms of existence – hell beings, ghosts, animals, titans, and gods who cry out to them, experientially gaining a broader sense of the myriad suffering beings that share in cyclic existence with the practitioner. These social soundscapes of suffering give way to those of transcendent figures: Indian deities such as Brahmā, Visnu, and Indra; mythical beings such as the kalapingka bird; and Sky-Dancer goddesses of the five Buddha families. The practitioner is now surrounded by communities of transcendent and awakened beings that express mantric particles, frighten practitioners with blood-thirsty screams, soothe them with sublime music, and teach Buddhist doctrine. Throughout this experiential process, the practitioner is never alone, though their bodies remain in isolation.

### *Conclusion: Sonic Contemplations in the Great Perfection*

This leads us to a richer understanding of the ways the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is considering and producing pathways for religious experience and attainment. First, for this tradition, it has become clear that the senses, and hearing in particular, are critical pathways for religious experience. We have a taste of this already in the Great Perfection, with its highest practice of *Direct Crossing* consisting of visionary experiences. However, this complicates our understanding of the sensory model employed by Tibetan Buddhists at this time and introduces hearing as its own pathway for achieving high levels of Buddhist realization. This sensory aspect of religious experience infuses both the contemplative design of the practice and their

resultant experiences. Hearing is the medium through which humans and environments interact, an important relationship that is further emphasized by the specificity of bodies to elements. More broadly, religious experience in this practice is sensory in nature, as opposed to ineffable or indescribable conceptions of such experience found elsewhere in both Buddhism and the Great Perfection.<sup>37</sup> Here we find experiences of divine realms laid out in terms of their sensory qualities. Furthermore, the sensory mode of the religious experience matches the ordinary sense used to arrive there. Listening to the world leads to hearing the divine, clearly indicating that the production of religious experience in this contemplative practice is aural in nature.<sup>38</sup>

Second, we find that this process of gaining religious experience and attainment is constructed on a foundation of mundane experiences and concerns. Religious experience is a process of transformation (or natural liberation from the perspective of the Great Perfection). Our mundane world is revealed to be a naturally transcendent one, free from its normal constraints. The *Unimpeded Sound* substantiates the core Buddhist ideology of transcending the suffering inherent in cyclic existence by demonstrating how the mundane senses such as hearing become free from their normal limitations and start to hear transcendent soundscapes through contemplative practice. Mundane sounds that typically delude beings into further calcification of cyclic existence become sublime and revelatory. This process of liberation happens on the other major levels of this practice as well – the environmental, physiological, and social. Natural and material environments lose their physical dangers and are sublimated into divine soundscapes, one's ordinary body is optimized and invigorated with bliss, and individuals in isolated practice conditions find themselves deeply connected to a wider Buddhist universe.

Finally, we come to understand the kinds of ideological work that's being done on both sides of design and experience to encode a Buddhist framework onto a process of sensory engagement to produce specifically religious experiences. From a methodological perspective, these experiences occur through an easeful and natural process – all

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of how sensory religious experiences complicate views of ineffable experiences, see Kapstein 2004: ix–xiv.

<sup>38</sup> It is outside the scope or intent of this study to educate on the actuality of these sounds – whether the transcendent soundscapes that emerge in the practitioner's experience are new sounds that appear from beyond the practitioner's perspective, hallucinatory experiences caused by intense and prolonged periods of meditation, or simply divergent ways of apprehending the sounds of the elements. Regardless of their origin, the tradition is keen to generate frameworks for the interpretation of those sounds in Buddhist terms, making these sensory encounters religious in nature as discussed below.

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one has to do is listen. Practitioners do not actively change or transform anything themselves, inscribing Great Perfection ideas of natural freedom and spontaneity onto these unfolding sensory experiences. Cosmogonically, the natural world is seen as a manifestation of core elements emerging from the natural sound of reality. Our bodies likewise arise as the next stage of this process, and their major elemental constitutions are known based on given calculations of elements across calendrical time. Extraordinary sensory experiences are then overlaid with Buddhist cosmologies of suffering beings and transcendent deities, all of which provide experiential understandings of expressed Buddhist typologies and world-orderings, found both in this this tantra and in normative Tibetan Buddhist cosmologies. This is most evident in hearing the goddesses' melodies in the river, experientially substantiating the importance of the teacher's voice in the tantra's taxonomy of transcendent sound while invoking broader tantric ideologies in Tibetan Buddhism surrounding the five Buddha families. Thus, by weaving Great Perfection Buddhist ideas into designed contemplations on natural soundscapes and the emergent sounds and feelings they invoke, the *Unimpeded Sound* is able to offer not only unique aural experiences, but *religious* experiences.

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