

# Sit Like A Bell:

## Sound and the Body in Tibetan Buddhism



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Lobsag Khedup, a 32 year-old Tibetan Monk living in a single room at an art center in Zhongdian where he teaches the art of *thangka* painting, wakes in silence at 6 a.m. He pulls his bedding around him as if to make a nest out of it. It is cold and his action is somehow appropriate to the introversion of the hour. There is no light in the room, no room yet to speak of, just the dull indistinct sense of an interior. He sits up and starts to pray. But to pray isn't enough, he must make his devotional into a sound, a full-bodied sound that shakes the floor and brings the walls back to him in the shape of his voice. He is building a space with his body. Two miles away Lhazom Khedup unlocks the doors of the temple alter room and finds his place among the pillows and bowls, the smell of butter and seasoned wood. As he sings the Three Refuges the sun catches face of a statue of the Buddha and spreads across it to the next. The light like the whirring in his voice brings the body of the temple to life. In a small chamber attached to a monastery in the mountains in Deqin Lobsag Nydark prepares his body to go out with his sound. He passes his voice back through the ages of the earth, destratifying the body language has deposited in the mind like so much fine sediment, unsounded. And the listener cannot help but be convinced; this is a sound that sounds at the depths of being, a sound that jumps the gap between the body and the truth of its constitution. To be sure slowness and stillness have a speed and it can be tremendous. He is moving out, his musculature wired to the stars. But one could reasonably ask why sound at all and why this sound in particular, this almost frightening

chthonic rumbling? And how can a practice that mobilizes the entire body simultaneously be expected to liberate the practitioner from it, requiring as it does such attention to the life of senses, such a complex coordination of interior and exterior affects?

We can begin to answer these questions by pointing out an important difference between Tibetan Buddhism, the school in which this practice arises, and the other schools of Buddhism. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has argued that Tibetan Buddhism is unique with respect to the other major Buddhist traditions in the high status it confers on bodily experience in its spiritual practice (70). Using examples from popular religion like speed *mantra* chanting, the circumambulation of *stupas*, the ingestion of scriptures written in butter, and the touching of relics, Tokarska-Bakir traces this emphasis on embodied experience all the way back to the central figure in Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava (called in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche) placing his teaching of “liberation through the senses” at the very core of Tibetan spiritual practice (71). Indeed, even in the midst of the deepest forms of meditation (a word we have wrongly taken in the West to be almost synonymous with disembodiment) the body is the *site* of liberation and, as we shall see in the following, in the move from the gross body to the subtle body the five senses can actually function as vehicles for religious experience. In this paper I want to examine the relationship of sound to the composition and decomposition of the mind-body compound during meditation. I want to focus on the different kinds of sounds produced during chanting of the *mantras* at morning prayers by several monks from the Geluk-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism in an effort to show how it is that a vocal production which subsumes the entire body could be related to the alleged “liberation from the body and desire” these practices seek to achieve.

But before moving into my discussion of the function of *mantra* in Tibetan Buddhism I want to introduce a conceptual vocabulary that I think productively traverses the gap between my

largely Western understanding of musicality and the Tibetan understanding of the spiritual function of the vocal recitation of scripture, which remained largely inaccessible to me in its technical details due to the language barrier separating me from my interviewees and to the unwillingness on the part of those with the most knowledge to bring a novice and a non-practitioner like me directly and immediately into the fold. In the eleventh chapter of their 1986 collaborative work Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia entitled “On the Refrain,” the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari create (as if from scratch) an immensely versatile conceptual vocabulary for understanding music (and more broadly the production of sound by living organisms) which I think shares its most fundamental claim with the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the cosmos: Life is not a closed system but consists, at its most basic level, of the composition, decomposition and re-composition of relationships with a world that exists outside of the body it animates. For Deleuze and Guattari, the production of sound patterns (or refrains), is one way living organisms regulate or compose their relationship to the outside. Indeed the production of sound always involves the creation, or the marking out of a territory (312). To subsume all vocal productions under this model is to “construe music as an open structure that permeates and is permeated by the world,” (Bogue 87-88). This represents a break with the dominant understanding of music in the West, where music is seen to be a self-referential, mathematically closed structure, bearing little or no relation at all to anything save the rules governing its articulation (87-88).

A refrain is any patterned sound that stakes out a territory. In the animal world sound offers the organism 1) a way to extend itself beyond the limits of its physical body (ex. a dog barking at an intruder, a lion roaring to mark the extent of its claim) 2) a way to bring its body into a more complex relationship with the outside world (bird song, whale song, the cry of a wolf)

(322). Territories are always formed out of chaos, the chaos against which the body can be said to exist, and the repetitive nature of the refrain represents an attempt on the part of the organism to code the space of the body by defining or probing the space around it, bringing it into a composable relation (313). Deleuze and Guattari call any coded block of space-time a milieu (311). One could see the shape and coloration of the petals of an orchid as a milieu, where yellow with black bands and cylindricality constitute the refrain. But if placed on a long enough time scale it becomes apparent that the periodic repetition of this shape/color pattern is not self contained but arises in response to changes that occurs where other milieus blend into the surface of the flower. In this case the milieu of the wasp's body (yellow, black bands) is incorporated into the code whose periodic repetition gives the orchid its physical characteristics. This movement between the wasp and the orchid Deleuze and Guattari call rhythm, or the action that occurs between milieus over time in a given environment. What Deleuze and Guattari call the wasp-becoming of the orchid can be considered territorial because it is "an act that affects milieus and rhythms" Elements of the orchid's environment emerge as qualities of the flower (the wasp becomes it's coloration on the flower) and the capturing of the wasp's code is essentially *expressive*, since this transformation happens entirely on the flower's terms i.e. the orchid does not actually become a wasp but "hums the wasp's motif" with its organs, and this humming, this improvisation passes from the functional over into the expressive. The orchid's structure expresses its relationship to the outside; it has deterritorialized certain elements of its environment (the wasp) and reterritorialized them on the surface of its body (as black and yellow bands) to create a totally unique assemblage, a territory. But the difference between this process of territorilization through the mechanism of the refrain and the production of voluntary sound or music is crucial. Deleuze and Guattari define music as "the active creative operation which

consists of deterritorializing the refrain” (318). If the voice has a territorializing function with respect to communication, that is, if structure of the vocal chords, the tongue and the lips arise between the internal milieu of impulses and the external milieu of circumstances such that the two can be brought into the stable relationship with each other that refer to as communication, then singing is the expressive destabilization this relationship. Singing subverts the functional apparatus of the vocal chords by forcing this apparatus back into contact with the impulsive life of the body. In short singing deterritorializes the voice, since the becoming that takes place during the singing of the song brings the body into contact with an outside it continues to express for the duration of the song, without ever making the expression of this relation territorial in the sense just mentioned.<sup>1</sup> Music decomposes a territorial relation in order to compose new relations with the outside that are entirely expressive of the relation that arises in the space between.

I want to argue that both movements of territorialization (the sonic composition of the body and the space for meditation) and movements of deterritorialization (the becoming-world of the body through sound) are present in the practice of reciting *mantras* among the monks I observed and interviewed and that the speed of one movement relative to the other depended largely on the milieu their sound drew on and participated in i.e. the physical location of the monks when they were chanting. Unlike other types of vocal music where the much of the theory I have just developed must be inferred, Tibetan Buddhist chant is unique in that it is explicit in its intent on composing both kinds of relations (territorial and deterritorializing) with the body it

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<sup>1</sup> Take for example the genre of Mongolian songs played on the *erhu* that are supposed to express the action of horses running. Admittedly the *erhu* no matter how percussively it is played does not sound anything like horses running, nor does it sound like the *action* of a running horse which has no sound associated with it at all... being a movement of the body. The instrument though is made to enter into a horse becoming which transforms that movement into a sound capable of being produced by the instrument. The horse's movement is deterritorialized without at the same time becoming a component of the instrument itself (in the way that the orchid takes on physically characteristics of the wasp), since the sound of the music is produced *between* the musician and the *erhu*.

is meant to fill up and empty out at the same time and with the world it is meant to permeate and become. I hope to make it clear later that as one monk, Lobsag Khedup, put it, “The mantra is more than speech and less than song. It is somewhere in between the two” (Lobsag I). This is to say that the mantra has a territorial function and hence falls short of being music in the sense just defined as long as it is directed towards the construction of a particular body or space; often this requires that the meaning be present in the mind of the chanter. But written into this ritual act of vocal repetition is the assumption that the meaning will slide after so many repetitions and the movement become one of pure sound, pure flight, pure deterritorialization, opening the body up to an outside it can recover less and less of the stable self from each time .

Since the scope of my study was geographically limited to Zhongdian (now Shangri’la) and the majority of Buddhist monks (all of the monks I was able to interview) living there are adherents of the Geluk-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism, and any conclusions I come to about the function of vocal recitation of scripture in achieving liberation will be limited to the understanding of Buddhism unique to this subset of practitioners, it will do to locate this particular branch of Buddhism in relation to the other historical traditions and give a summary explanation of its thought. Broadly and succinctly put, Tibetan Buddhism (considered as a regional phenomenon, and hence, as a whole apart from its division into schools) is a regional subset of a subset (Vajrayana) of a subset (Madhyamaka) of Mahayana Buddhism (Gethin 272). In practice Tibetan Buddhism follows fairly closely on the vision of the Buddha’s teaching put forth in the scholarly works of “the Greater Vehicle.” Emphasis is placed on the gradual development and perfection of the spiritual life through individual practice with the end of becoming a bodhisattva, or a being that, having awakened through the practice of the perfections, is reborn in order to lead others to awakening (227).

Philosophically though, there are further divisions to be made, divisions which will have consequences in practice. Tibetan Buddhism's epistemology/ontology (it is not clear to me that the two are held to be separate) follows largely on the teachings of the "middle" (or Madhyamaka) school of Mahayana Buddhism, founded by in the second century C.E. by Nargarjuna (237). According to Nargarjuna the Buddha's teachings could be traced back to one fundamental insight: Emptiness is the ultimate reality of the world we live in; things are empty of their own inherent existence (239). The Four Noble truths and the Eightfold Path all derive, in some sense, from this understanding of the world as a relational entity connected at every point to an outside that undermines the singularity of any one of its members (240). The reason this distinction is important is that the centrality of "emptiness" in Tibetan Buddhism feeds directly into the practice of meditation: if awakening involves gaining some knowledge of reality by making that knowledge the singular object of one's concentration during meditation and the nature of reality is "emptiness," then the gradual step-by-step path to enlightenment must be laid out in order to facilitate the practitioner's ability to grasp "emptiness" and at that moment necessarily abandon all grasping. I, of course, want to suggest that it is precisely the movement of the body into the global register of vibration or sound during meditation that constitutes the understanding of emptiness.

In his spiritual manual the *Abhidharmakosa*, the north Indian scholar Vasubandhu outlines just this approach to emptiness through meditation<sup>2</sup> (195). Here the movement of the practitioner toward liberation is divided into five paths (the path of equipment, the path of

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<sup>2</sup> I do not know if it is chronologically appropriate to invoke Vasubandhu here. In my attempt to move from the understanding of emptiness in Nargarjuna to the tantric practices that are central to Tibetan Buddhism, Vasubandhu with his emphasis on the body and the senses, seemed like a great way to transition into Vajrayana and tantric practice as an extension of his methodology. I have neither the time nor the resources (human or otherwise) to be able to check my reasoning against the authorities.



application, the path of seeing, the path of development, and the path of completion) and the thought or the contemplation of emptiness is more intensely involved at each successive stage in the process (195). The path of equipment involves attaining the preconditions for liberation that the monastic life largely provides one with (195). The ordinary path of development involves cultivating the calm that will function as a launch pad for the path of application, during with one practices various forms of insight meditation that literally “bring one to one’s senses” and facilitate the movement from the gross to the subtle body through the contemplation of the five aggregates (discussed below) (196). At the attainment of “the highest ordinary state” the practitioner sees directly and instantaneously grasps the Four Noble Truths (197). Further spiritual development aimed at bring oneself more and more into contact with emptiness through dissolving ones attachments to the world during the path of transcendent development finally culminates in a state of total concentration at which point one has reached the “path of the adept” or completion—in the Mahayana understanding at this point one becomes a bodhisattva.

This notion that focusing on the sensual aspects of existence could bring one (negatively, as it were) to a particularly vivid understanding of emptiness would be taken up and extended by Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism, bearing as it does traces of all of the larger divisions just discussed, is perhaps closest to Tibetan Buddhism itself, beyond which there are simply the divisions (based on lineage) into the two main schools according to the emphasis they place on tantric practice versus analytical inquiry. When Buddhism was introduced to Tibet between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries it consisted of two paths which would eventually be integrated into one and the same practice: the conventional Mahayana practice of “gradual path” outlined above, and the esoteric path of the *tantras* (268). *Tantra* in Sanskrit literally means “weave” and the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism consists largely of learning to

master a series of special techniques that allow the practitioner to weave his or her body more deeply into the cosmos it has been provisionally and arbitrarily separated from (269). The long-duration chanting of mantras or protective spells, the painting of images of the Buddha or other deities in a sort of trance-like state and the selective positioning of one's body according to a complex understanding of its composition are three examples of tantric practice. The goal of these practices was to bring the practitioner closer to the "emptiness" at the heart of things through a "borderline" experience of presence, in some cases the excessive presence of another person's body during sexual intercourse (269). Not surprisingly this led to certain excesses within the *sangha*, since it was often viewed as a faster way to gain access to the truth. Indeed it was Je Tsong-kappa, the founder of the Gelug-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism, who, in the late fourteenth century, would exact a return to the analytically inflected contemplation of emptiness on the gradual path that he found in the writings of the *Madhyamaka* school, only after the attainment of which the acquisition of tantric skills would be permitted<sup>3</sup> (271). Despite this emphasis on scholasticism, the Geluk-pa school still incorporates a number of tantric practices (the long duration recitation of mantras being one of them) and the experience of the body and the world through the five senses as necessary to attaining enlightenment is still central to their teaching.

In order to advance on the problem of sound and what part it plays in liberation we must examine the understanding of the body in Tibetan Buddhism. I encountered two ways of looking at the body during my interviews although in order to understand the details of these views I

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<sup>3</sup> Although Gethin makes this point about a kind of aversion or resistance to tantric practice being a central tenant of the Geluk-pa philosophy, Lobsag Nydark, one of the monks I interviewed claimed that it took 21 years to become a *geshe* in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy at the university he attended in India and only three to become versed in tantric practice. The very fact that he had completed his tantric schooling but not his philosophy would seem to suggest just the opposite: that most monks come to know tantric practice before they come to know the philosophy behind it.

would eventually have to turn to books on the subject since there was a general aversion to talking in detail about these ideas with people “who do not understand these things” as Lobsag Khedup would say to me whenever I would push for clarification. The first view arises in the context of the sutras and sees the body as being dividable into five “heaps” (*skandha*) or “aggregates” that correspond to the various combinations or intermixtures of matter that result in physical and psychological conditions or sensations in the body: intermixture of matter in the body, the intermixture of raw sensation, the intermixture of words and ideas (concepts), the intermixture of desires (volition), and the intermixture of states of consciousness that go beyond sensation. Robert A.J. Thurman, in his translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead prefers to translate *skandha* as “process” in order to emphasize the durational quality of these intermixtures, the fact that they constitute movements the body is taken up in for as long as it exists in *samsara* (36) In his The Foundations of Buddhism, Rupert Gethin theorizes that the goal of practice might be thought of as the process of replacing the given aggregates with five new aggregates, or processes: perfect conduct, meditation, wisdom, freedom, and knowledge/understanding (32). Lobsag Khedup, a monk I lived in close quarters with for almost a month in Zhongdian at an art center where he currently teaches the art of *thangka* painting again refused to go into detail but did say, “The body is made up of so many things, blood and thoughts and desires. The sound of the chanting I make is to separate them out.” (Lobsag)

The second and, I found, more commonly held view of the body arises in the tantric context and sees it as composed of drops (*tikle*) and winds (*rlung*) which locate the experience of the body on three different levels or planes (Thurman 34). Our first and most vivid experiences are attached to the “gross body” the body of flesh, blood and bone, to which one gains access to through the five senses (36). The “subtle body” corresponds to the interior states and desires that

both arise out of combinations of sensations in the gross body, and are, in some sense, separate from them, located above them on a different plane (36). The “subtle body” is made up of thousands of channels or energy pathways all connected to six wheels (corresponding to the chakras in the Indian system) strung together along the centerline of the body running from the top of the skull to the tip of the genitals (36). Each of these wheels contains a drop of pure energy associated with states of consciousness completely independent of the “gross body” but to which one gains access negatively by experiencing the “gross body” and abstracting from that an unmixed experience of the whole (36). At the highest stage of awareness one gains access to an energy pattern in the heart wheel that corresponds to the “extremely subtle body” a body from which one’s state of consciousness is no longer separable (36). Without going into very much detail about the experience of each level, Lobsang Nydark, a monk who lives for six months out of the year at the Gholgupling Monestary between Zhongdian and Deqin, told me that meditation involved moving slowly through the experiences associated with the gross body to the subtler experiences at higher levels of awareness. “One must have those experiences in order to gain access to the higher senses. When one is in meditation sight becomes a higher sight but it is still sight. You see only what is real. And that is emptiness” (Nydark). I took it from our discussion that the experience of the “extremely subtle body” would correspond to emptiness as a feeling associated with the body once its status as a pure relation comes to the fore. “When I pray I am not here [gesturing to his body] but there [gesturing to the opposite side of the room] and there [gesturing out the window]. I am nowhere.” (Nydark)

The relationship of the actual sound produced during the recitation of scripture to the body of the monk, as I had it explained to me, was explicitly connected to this tantric model of the body. Here each syllable of the (or in some cases certain root syllables) of *mantra* are related

to specific points on the body's central axis of revolving wheels. This is the first *territorializing* aspect of the chant. The *mantra* serves to unify or compose the body with sound, or through the resonance of the voice, by placing it in touch with those centers of energy or awareness that are associated with subtler levels of perception. We could also say that the mantra strives to compose a relationship to the world for the body that is unique to Buddhism, or one that will be conducive to the attainment of liberation. "The chanting makes the body all one thing. It is healthy to pray because the sound comes through the heart point and all the body's confused perceptions become one." (Lobsag) There is a whole order of visualizations tied through the syllable to various points on the body that one passes through during the recitation (Lobsag I). For example, during the recitation of the syllables OM AH AUM one imagines white light (representing the universe's native energy) passing through a point on top of the head to coincide with the pronunciation of the syllable which stands for this self-same creative potential (Lobsag I). AH is associated with a point in the throat, with the energy of speech and the formation of the body and red light is imagined to enter there and spread through the chest cavity and into the torso (Lobsag I). AUM is associated with the energy of mind and green light is imagined to enter the point directly between the eyebrows (Lobsag I). Unfortunately Lobsag Khedup refused to locate this mantra in the context of the morning liturgy saying, as he would several more times before the end of the interview, that this was a "secret" and that he had already gone too far in describing the process to me.

I was also able to observe that the prayers also change inflection depending on the chakric centers they are associated with. During prayers to one of the Geluk-pa school's central deities *Sonwandebaba* (Guhyasamaja) or passages from longer sutras sound is thrown from the back of the throat high up into the nasal passages in a fashion that approaches vocal techniques

that are often used in the female vocal parts in many Tibetan folk songs. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as the “machining of the voice” in order to call attention to a use of the voice which deprives it of its “natural” or “functional” center in the diaphragm and the bronchial tubes sending it elsewhere and putting it to entirely expressive ends (303). During the recitation of the prayers to Tara sound oscillates between two pitches, starting high and dying off, but radiates for the entire duration of each section of the prayer from the center of the throat. The lowest pitch generated at the base of the throat, where the breast bone meets the neck, almost in the chest. Chanting in the range is a practice unique to the Geluk-pa school (Lobsag I). Some practiced monks can actually produce chords or “overtones” in this way, generating in the process an extra voice that whirrs and whistles up near the palate over the low notes produced in the chest. Listening to this, as I had a chance to briefly at Songzanlin Monestary just outside of Zhongdian, brought it to my attention, for the first time, that this type of singing not just figuratively but literally involved developing a relationship to the outside: the sound at least from the perspective of the listener, at some point ceases to be associated with the singer but seems rather to come from the space just above his head. Despite the overwhelming impression this low rumbling sound gives its listeners that it is outgoing, Khedup repeatedly associated it with images and motions of reception. “Like I will to drink [sic] the world,” he said (Lobsag I). Unlike the other two modes of singing, this mode does not focus on a specific segment of the body but passes through the whole corpus through the wheel located in the heart, the point on which the energy cycles of the body’s organs and regulatory systems are based (Lobsag I).

As will be shown in the following, the tonal variation and interpellation of the sound is largely up to the individual monk. According to Lobsag Khedup certain portions of certain prayers are sung lower in the vocal register when the content of the verse is being directed

outward relative to the monk's body (as with OM MANI PADME HUM, which is directed at all sentient beings) and higher in the vocal register (with more tonal variation) when its content corresponds to the monk himself (as with the beginning of the prayer to Dolma (Tara) where the monk is asking to receive Tara's qualities). Not surprisingly the most liberating, healthiest register to sing in is the lowest, because, as I already pointed out, it is associated with the heart wheel, the focal point of diamond-like awareness latent in the body; it is also the "best" because it is the most difficult (there is nevertheless always a hierarchy of skill embedded even in the most "selfless" practices) and because it has the greatest reach of all the registers one sings in during meditation.

But in order for this analysis to be properly placed within the context of the Geluk-pa school of Tibetan Buddhism it must consider practice of vocal recitation in its institutional manifestations.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism we must remember was not a philosophy of isolation. On the contrary developing relations of dependency with a community of lay people was a central part of Buddhist practice almost from the moment the *sangha* was conceived. Lhazom Khedup is the head monk at *Lakher*, a temple on a low hill just outside the walls of the ancient city on the outskirts of Zhongdian. Each morning he prays aloud as people from the surrounding community filter in and out of the sanctuary space, prostrating themselves and placing their offerings. The temple walls are saturated with colorful *thangka* paintings and silk wall hangings, the space surrounding the box Lhazom sits in to pray is littered with statues and banners and prayer flags

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously, in order to be complete, this study would need to develop at length an analysis of the role chanting and prayer takes in the life of the monastery. Unfortunately during the time allotted to me by SIT for the completion of this study travel to the relevant locations was difficult and at times impossible due to the tension the situation in Tibet had then recently generated and the possibility of arranging interviews with specific monks or spending an extended time in observation was completely out of the questions. This was in part because my advisor feared for the stability of his company if the "research" I would have been conducting at these larger monasteries had he let me use his connections was ever linked to his *thangka* center, or his travel company. I don't know why exactly but he did.

“The prayers are asking for protection for the community, sometimes for blessing, good fortune. When I pray I do not pray for myself. My prayers go out here [gesturing at a painting of Nomtusee, directly across from him] and out there [gesturing to Zhongdian below]. This is my way of not being selfish, since I pray to them or for them” (Lhazom).

This corresponds to the second territorializing function of the chant. If in the first analysis it was the body that was being drawn into composition here it is the space of the monastery itself that is being established and drawn into relation with the body through sound. Elements of the milieu are attached to the body such that they become qualities and rhythms are established between the monk and his environment such that they become *expressive* of that relation. Indeed the first two prayers accomplish exactly this end. The action of the first is called “taking refuge” and refuge here can be read in two ways: as the monk's body, in the prayer that he says, which all sentient beings are asked to take refuge in (and this corresponds to the first territorializing feature of the practice of recitation) (Lhazom). The second is a blessing of the various offerings he has received, a prayer for offerings or gifts generally, and here gift is used in the broadest sense to refer to the entire milieu as it sustains the life of the monk (Lhazom). Each offering corresponds to one of the five senses (aragon/badim—water/taste but also thirst (a desire), yeneh—sound/hearing, donbgbin—body/touch, nobom—flower/smell, allokeh—light/sight, nenti—loaf made of samba/taste but also hunger (a desire)) where the prayer itself serves to distance them from the potential for attachment that clings to them in their pre-offered forms (Lhazom). The sound of the prayer itself becomes a conductor for that relation. It is a metaphor for the detachment at the heart of the prayer, insofar as the prayer detaches itself from the monk and “goes out” as Lhazom said, to the community.



Two other elements of the milieu are brought to bear on the sound that is responsible for generating the sacred space: the bell (*drilbu*) which is the sound, Lhazom told, of emptiness and represents those aspects of the Buddha's teachings that go beyond hearing, that can only be extended as sound, and the two-sided drum (*damaru*) that one plays by rotating it to get the mallets (attached by strings to the side of the drum) to swing around and hit the heads. The two-sides of the drum are supposed to represent the duality of form and emptiness. Both of these instruments carry elements of the milieu through the activity of chanting in ways that direct to body to the ends the sound of the chanting has intended for it, specifically, emptiness. The drum also functions to awaken the sleeping deities and in the process keep the monk awake and praying at such an early hour. Khedup even went as far as suggesting that the monastery does not really exist as a space until he begins praying each morning (Lhazom).

The remainder of the prayers said each morning are directed to an *yidam* or guiding figure with qualities the monk attempts to acquire during the prayer. Each has a mantra either that it was credited with saying (if the figure is an historical personage) or that corresponds to its teaching. As Lhazom said, "A lama is someone you learn from, your personal teacher. An *yidam* is something you *become*. *Yidams* don't exist in the same way as a lama does" (Lhazom). We could say then that the *yidam* functions as a sort of vehicle, a state one passes into, a kind of function through which the world or one's experience of it passes and is altered. Dolma is an example of a deity whose characteristics of supreme calm and compassion one attempts to generate or find in oneself through the action of reciting her mantra. Sometimes this process is aided by visualizing Dolma so intensely that something of the visualization brushes off on the one doing the visualization (Lhazom). To put this in the terms of our earlier discussion of forms, the image of Dolma is deterritorialized as a mental image and reterritorialized on the body of the

monk. “I try to visualize her. Sometimes I find though that I am just looking at her image on the wall” (Lhazom). We can see in this territorializing aspect of the image which has its counterpart in the language of the mantra that corresponds to it. The inner transformation of the monk occurs through the meaning of the words. Meaning is a form of territoriality; meaning territorializes through memory, through the one who remembers the meaning and locates himself in relation to it. “When I speak the words I go into to them. I am trying to be like them”(Lhazom). this might be related on some level to the way the Buddha’s body is talked about in scripture once he has attained enlightenment—as *dharma-kaya*. *Dharma* can refer to the state of perfection through which the Buddhas action will no pass but *kaya* can refer both to the Buddha’s physical corporeal body or to the body of texts that are relevant to attaining this state of action or existence (Ghetin 30). Literally the body becomes the text. The body enters into a new relationship to the world through the performative gesture of uttering the words of Buddha. The *yidam* is the figure of the inner composition or territorialization that occurs relative to the territorialization of the exterior space the voice composes. The language of *mantra*, its meaning is related to incorporation of elements of the milieu (be it a spiritual one) the becoming-like the monk passes through with respect to a given deity and the sound that carries this message passes out of the body and into the structure of the temple itself through the ears of the community who is present for the prayers, hears them, receives merit even from the sound itself.

But the action of composition or territorialization of the sacred space is likewise dual in nature: his prayers compose the space of the temple, and by extension the community and the community composes him by providing him with food and by giving him poultry as a signifier of the loss they are able to sustain willingly in the name of compassion. *Lakher* is, in fact, known for the chickens (brought there by peasants) that roam around its exterior (Lhazom). When I

asked why the monastery was located just outside of the city but not in it a metaphor developed for the action of the mantra itself, related to the fact that unlike the more centrally located monastery in Zhongdian this is the one people brought their chickens to. “The monastery is outside. It is removed from the life [sic]. They are bringing [the chickens] away from death” (Lhazom). This signifies that they are being removed from circulation which is of course one of the connotations of nirvana, that one passes out of the realm of suffering and desire. I wondered if he too would consider himself removed (in the lesser sense) and if there wasn’t a corollary dislocation taking place when people bring him perfectly healthy chickens and have merit conferred on them for doing so. Sound here has the function of making something in its rigid functionality disappear; Lhazom’s body then acts as a kind of conduit through which a community deterritorializes itself.

The low guttural sound he would use to sing long portions of his morning prayers was described to me differently on two separate occasions: first, the sound made during meditation was compared to the image of a stone cast into the ocean where the steady, low sound imitates the stone’s sinking into the depths of the sea, and later in the image of the same stone thrown into calm water where the sound imitates the ripples spreading out over the surface. When I asked for clarification Khedup insisted that it was both, the first image represented his experience as a meditator sinking into emptiness and the second described the sound as it was experienced by the sentient beings his prayer was directed at (Khedup). Later, this same sound it was compared to the wind “blowing in the desert, over the sand” and on at least two occasions during our conversations, Khedup gestured to the low sound of air rushing through the grate when the fire in the fireplace burned at a particularly high intensity. These analogies would suggest that while sound organized by a mantra composes the body, unifying it, and making it resonate with itself

through the various chakras, it is also aimed at decomposing or deconstructing those same relations, especially the relation we refer to as the Self. This second *deterritorializing* function of sound can be located in the *natural processes* these images are connected to. A stone which disappears into the depths of the ocean, wind which blows across the sand and the mountains, eroding it and carrying the sand away, and a fire drawing in and devouring the air surrounding it, the sound of the closed space of the fire place being evacuated. Lobsag Khedup made it clear that he was not imitating these sounds as they occur in the world, since they represented to him the world itself as a natural process, a process encompassed by the Buddhist concept of impermanence, which one would seek to affirm in the body at the expense of the self (Lobsag). Instead a kind of becoming-world occurs during the chant that deterritorializes the world by making it into sound that is capable of being produced by human vocal chords at the same time the vocal chords, and by extension the entire human body is deterritorialized by the departure it makes from communication. Indeed, Lobsag Nydark told me that low OM was “the sound the world makes” so that in the act of vocally re-producing it, not in an attempt to communicate the world or the essence of the world in language but in an attempt to make it and the one who speaks it *become together*, one facilitates the extinguishing of the self by forcing the self, insofar as it is related to the body, to take on manifestly global characteristics, precisely those global characteristics it already has, existing as it does only as a *pure relation*. To put it in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the monk and the world “are in no way the same thing, but Being expresses them both in a single meaning in a language that is no longer that of words, in a matter that is no longer that of forms, in an affectability that is no longer that of forms” (258). We could say that when chant shifts into its deterritorializing register elements of the milieu (in this case the natural phenomena just described become) become qualities (sounds) and the rhythm which arises

between milieus become an expressive characteristic with respect to a specific domain (the monk's body). In our own separate discussion of the hand-gestures Lobsag Nydark connected this notion of the "sound of the world" to one of the gestures of the Buddha he imitates when he meditates, specifically the "earth-touching gesture" from the canonical story of the Buddha's enlightenment. "You see [gesturing to the ground] you cannot just rely on yourself. You must go out" (Nydark). The circle the body draws with its sound no longer serves the purpose of establishing some kind of coded somatic unity but risks the outside. The assemblage of the body is opened out onto the Cosmos and takes something on in the form of a sound that

The erosion of the canonical referentiality of the individual of syllables in the *mantra* was a constant theme in my discussions and, interestingly, this action, this ability to make the words in the mantra pass out of meaning, was always referred to as happening at a higher level of practice than the one most of the monks I interviewed were (or currently believed themselves to be) at. We can perhaps turn to Vasubandhu who said "the real sense of *mantras* consists of an absence of meaning and that by meditating on absent meaning you come to understand the ontological unreality of the universe." "OM" as the universal syllable, unformed matter of the universe recedes precisely so the process it describes, the return to an originary state of existence, can take effect. "The mantras can teach you something if you know what they mean but in the end you must forget the meaning and just remember your breath" (Nydark). The ritualized aspect of the chanting is pushed to its absolute limit: the sense of the words being pronounced cannot survive the demands repetition and the new vocal register in which it is being sung are placing on it and the meaning is lost. According to Lobsag Khedup the loss of meaning of the words one was singing was more or less identical to the (temporary) loss of the self. A content is assumed by the language that is not linguistic but bodily, one that prevents the syllables uttered during the

chant from returning as referents because the very linguistic entity that would be capable of fielding their meaning has literally *gone out* with the sound. To return to our earlier formulation with respect to Yangzom Khedup's situation in the temple, we might say that the same kind of removal from circulation that occurs in the context of the receiving of an offering occurs again with respect to the language of the *mantra*, which is itself removed from its role as a signifier of its content in the realm of communication. The meaning of the words is subordinated to the efficacy of the sound, which carries a content on one level and abhors that very same content on another. The sonic mechanism of the mantra's extension prevents its return to the monk as a meaning because the condition on which the full extent of the compassion the message carries actually reaches its destination in all sentient life is precisely the dissolution of the self that served as a vehicle for the constitution of the message. The essence of the mantra is not its meaning since it has no *stateable equivalent* and equivalence is alas the condition on which signification becomes possible. Rather, its essence lies in the state of mind/body it produces in the vehicle, through which a certain kind of action (compassion) becomes possible. As Yangzom Khedup put it modestly, "When I sing it is not for me."

It is surprising to note that this ability to lose track of the meaning of the words was twice related to the extent of one's removal from the monastery context. "I lived in a monastery in India for six years. We chanted every day. And it is difficult there when you are saying it all together. They control you. They control your mind... the others who are saying the prayer I would say that when I am on my own, when I am travelling it is more free." It is almost as if in the context of the monastery can only accomplish the territorializing functions of the mantra, go through those motions that will always result in a Tibetan monk who is obedient and compassionate and knowledgeable and not necessarily in an . These motions, when they are

carried out in an institutional context constitute a *barrier* of sorts precisely because they inevitably result in the creation of a self of sorts even if it is the kind of self that has every intention of losing itself eventually. “It is very difficult not to attach one’s self to the practice when you are in a monastery” (Nydark). He added that while there is a form of meditation in Tibetan Buddhism that is silent (although not totally, since often prayers are muttered under the breath throughout) it is in its own way a disciplinary form, no less so than the mass chanting of the mantra in halls of the monastery (Nydark). The truly radical movement of the body, the decomposition of its habitual relations that the production of the universal sound of the mantra can facilitate under the right conditions, is left up to the individual monk. Lobsag Khedup continually praised his situation living alone in the *thangka* center because it allowed him the ability to improvise, even to experiment with his voice while still operating within the confines of the discipline of recitation, which began, alas, to look less and less confining the more I learned about what exactly was going on musically. In listening to him pray each morning and comparing recordings I did on a handheld tape recorder I pointed out to him that the speed of delivery was never exactly the same for a given phrase, he seemed pitched elements differently and his descent into the lower registers of his voice occurred at slightly different points in the prayer. Occasionally near the end of his sessions he would lapse into a kind of nonsense reverie of sound and vocal noise that was notable in its departure from the structured sound of the earlier prayers. “I am not thinking when I pray,” he said, “I am just going on. At one monastery they may teach you to go up here and down there at another they may teach you to go down here and up there. It does not matter. The movement which comes from here [gesturing to his heart] is the same. Even if it does not sound the same.” (Lobsag). As to the relative inconsistencies I pointed out to him as occurring even within his own practice, he said rather succinctly “It is just a feeling.

And it changes” (Lobsag I). Because, as I understood it, it was not *his* feelings that changed the rhythm but a change that arose between his body and the affective states associated with the particular mantra, between him and the thing which passes through him and find its expression in the sound. I took his meaning to be that changes in speed correspond to *qualitative* changes in the body of the monk. If the body is in some sense composed of various speeds and slownesses consistent with its habits of desiring then the goal of sung meditation is to assign the body a new velocity, one that does not coincide with the self. I believe the paradox at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism of how to reconcile so much ritual with a teaching that was, at least in its original formulation, basically anti-ritualistic can be resolved in this context. I have attempted to show in the first part of this paper that it is through the vehicle of the ritual that the practicing self is provisionally constituted. The repetition at the heart of the ritual runs parallel to the repetition of the always-the-same that we in the West refer to as the action of self-identification, but once this repetition runs to excess, as it undoubtedly does in the context of even a three day retreat, the mechanism of the self is revealed. The impulse to repeat that lies at the heart of identity is outsourced to the mantra itself. The voice, and here the entire vocal apparatus, which is usually subordinated to the external milieu of signs and signifiers (in short communication) is put back in touch with the involuntary impulsive life of the body in its singular construction. But precisely what one realizes once this impulsive life makes it through into sound is that it is already an outside, that far from betraying some inherent constellation of impulses that constitutes a “true” self, the body is seen for what it really is: a pure relation.

In line with Tibetan Buddhism’s appreciation of the state of “betweenness” Lobsag Khedup told me that he never knows for sure when to finish because he always finds himself in between two successive sounds, a place where there is always another (Lobsag II). His solution I



gathered is to abandon himself to movement itself. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this discontinuous, running away of sound, this deterritorialization of the mechanical gesture as the construction of a heterogenous “*sound block* that no longer has a point of origin since it is always and already in the middle of the line... a deterritorialized rhythmic block that has abandoned points, coordinates, and measure, like a drunken boat that melds with the line” (296). We would have to return to Lobsag Nydark’s claim that “sight is not sight” but becomes something else once it is primed by relationality and no longer circumscribed by function. “Perception will no longer reside in the relation between a subject and an object, but rather in the movement serving as the limit of that relation... it will be in the midst of things, throughout its own proximity, as the presence of one haecceity in another” (282). It is this “presence of one haecceity [or state] in another” that I would call “compassion” in the Tibetan Buddhist context, the limitless relation through which happiness is cultivated. Further I would argue that this decompositional aspect of the *mantra* is at the heart of its exercise and that its mechanism is not the mantra itself but the *improvisation of a future relationship to sentient beings that passes through it in the form of a sound*. This is the reason that the multitude of local variations on a single mantra is tolerated, why there is no obsessive attempt even among the Geluk-pa to codify these gestures (Lobsag I). Indeed, we can extract the primacy of improvisation in the action of recitation from Deleuze and Guattari’s comments on the use of simple repetitive folk melodies and refrains in the music of Beethoven and Mozart, “...a musician requires a first type of refrain, a territorial or assemblage refrain, in order to transform it from within, deterritorialize it, producing a refrain of the second type as the final end of music: the cosmic refrain of a sound machine” (349). Something else, in addition to the simple repetitive phrase itself is allowed to pass through the body in the form of a sound, deterritorializing the phrase and the entire action of its production.

Perhaps the most striking description of this movement beyond the finite, closed space of the body into relationality was offered to be when I asked Lobsag Nydark if he associated an image with the thought of emptiness during meditation. He replied, “No you cannot think of emptiness in this way. It is not like an empty room with no chairs and tables. It is not even a room. We have a way of thinking this, called the *mandala*, this... like a big house for the mind, but it is just a way to help you think about it. You have to go through it to the place where there is no house.” According to Grace Cairns *mandala* refers the mind of the practitioner to a “spiritual interior” a phenomenal space resembling a palace of sorts with rooms emanating from a center that is the void (221). As Catherine Albanese has pointed out, in Tibetan Buddhism there is no rigid structural distinction between microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of existence (4). The mandala, she suggests, is the figure for the collapsing of this distinction, and should be seen as representation of the cosmos and of the body which inhabits it (6). What is important to realize here, in Nydark’s turn to the figure of the *mandala*, is the notion that reality governing both structures [emptiness] is the same and meditation is fundamentally the action of establishing or affirming *in practice* this ontological identity. The true function of the *yidam* developed in the above analysis can now be made clear. In the first kind of meditation, one which I have referred to as territorializing, an actual space is created with the sound passing through the body and the *yidam* serves as a physical relay for this construction. In the second form of meditation, the action of which is primarily one of deterritorialization, the *yidam* is merely the phenomenal approximation of a state of existence or affirmation of the truth through which Sound here acts as the vehicle which carries the words associated with the deity beyond their meanings.

During my interview with Lobsag Nydark I gestured to one of Lobsag Khedup’s works in progress, a *thangka* painting detailing all the important events of the Buddha’s life, which had,

positioned top and center a chambered whelk, and asked him what it meant. I had been sensing some residual connection between my work and this symbol ever since Lobsag Khedup had corrected my saying that the painting was “about Buddha’s life” by pointing to the seashell and saying, “No this [pointing to the seashell]. This is Buddha. Sound [clasping his hands to his mouth and blowing lightly through them] (Lobsag II). “Ah,” Nydark replied. “this is like the body[gesturing to the seashell]. Really it is empty. It is the sound of emptiness. Also used to call the people to prayer.” (Nydark). My entire theoretical development can pass through this symbol, just as the mind passes through the representation of the *yidam*. We have in the image of the chambered whelk a *literal space* secreted by an organism created using elements of the outside it has taken into its own body which offers it protection much like the *mantras* were originally intended to do. We also have an organic space that can be deterritorialized [put to a new use by human lips] in order to produce a sound, a sound which is generated from the outside merely by passing through the *empty spaces* of the shell, hollows which are, in some sense, the expression of the body of the creature in *negative space*. The moment it is used to make a sound the whelk becomes something else, it expresses a new relationship to the world which arises beyond the limits of its original somatic construction. The whelk is thirdly that instrument which brings together, draws together, composes a community of believers in the action of the breath’s extension through a space. A new kind of organic relationship, one that goes beyond the body and out into the world is constructed through the deconstruction of the previously closed relation of the shell. This is precisely the status of the body in relationship to the sound (or equally the truth) it mediates as I have come to understand in my conversations with the Tibetan monks I was able to converse with during my time in Zhongdian.

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