

Oral Genres and the Art of Reading in Tibet

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The word in its natural, oral habitat is part of a real, existential present.... Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words.¹

The evidence is substantial that it is only in relatively recent history, and specifically in the modern West, that the book has become a silent object, the written word a silent sign, and the reader a silent spectator.²

Overview

Tibetan Buddhist writings have long been intimately associated with various forms of orality. An understanding of how Buddhist texts are read or encountered in Tibetan traditions requires that we consider the forms of orality in which such textual encounters are embedded.

I see Tibetan oral genres as falling into two broad categories. The first is explanatory, such as the oral philosophy referred to here, and its primary purpose is to amplify the meaning of a text. The second is more ritualistic, for it includes oral forms in which sound rather than meaning is paramount, such as the recitation of mantra or various forms of rhythmic chanting. Tibetan oral performances vary considerably in terms of how they balance explanatory and ritual power, some utilizing one genre almost to the exclusion of the other, some having both but emphasizing one or the other. In practice, therefore, these two genres are often intertwined.

The variety of Tibetan oral genres, their relationship with written

¹ Ong 1982:101.

² Graham 1987:45.

texts, and the meditative use of both oral and written media can all be brought to bear on a single question: what does it mean in a Tibetan context to *read* a text such as that of Tsong-kha-pa's?³ Do contemporary Western concepts of *reading*, especially as practiced in Western academies or seminaries, which are modern Western culture's closest analogues to Tibetan monastic universities, suffice to explore the variety of activities encompassed by textual engagement in a traditional Tibetan setting?

We begin with a brief survey of the oral genres associated with textual engagement in Tibet, especially in the Geluk and Nyingma orders, respectively the newest and oldest forms of Tibetan Buddhism. In the second segment we consider relevant philosophical principles of Tibetan Buddhism, focusing on how its discussions of subjectivity are compatible with textual practices that include oral, conceptual, meditative, and sensory processes. The final segment illustrates how these processes intermingle in a widely used meditation text from the Gelukba tradition. I will propose that this intermingling produces a practice that includes but is not fully encompassed by modern concepts of reading, and that "reading" in the Tibetan context intertwines oral and literary orientations in a manner reflective of Tibet's situation as a powerfully oral culture with a highly developed and highly respected circle of literary achievement at its center.

Genres of Orality

A. Explanatory Forms

Speech is seen as in direct contact with meaning: words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous signs of his present thought. Writing, on the other hand, consists of physical marks that are divorced from the thought that may have produced them.⁴

³ The fourteenth-century founder of the Geluk order and teacher of the first Dalai Lama.

⁴ Culler 1982:100.

1. *Textual Commentary (gzhung khrid)*.⁵ Here, a text is used as a basis for lectures by a teacher or, in more intimate circumstances, for a series of discussions between student and teacher.⁶ Such oral philosophy replicates, questions, and expands on the text at hand, partly by bringing related texts into the discussion and partly through the teacher's own reflections on the text. The richness of this kind of oral scholarship derives in large measure from its capacity to integrate the major genres of *written* textual commentary. Therefore, we can best consider the explanatory oral genres if we pause briefly to take account of the five main genres of written textual commentary from which they draw inspiration.

A written "word" commentary (*tshig 'grel*), as its name suggests, comments on every word of a text, often including this aim as part of its title, for example, the nineteenth-century Nyingma scholar Mipham's *Word Commentary on the "Wisdom" Chapter [of Śāntideva's 'Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds]*.⁷ A "meaning commentary" (*don 'grel*) does not comment on every word but expands on a text's central issues, for example the late fifteenth-century Gelukba scholar Panchen Sönam Drakba's (bsod-nams-grags-pa) *General Meaning of [Maitreya's] "Ornament for Clear Realization"*.⁸ A "commentary on the difficult points" (*dga' 'grel*) is narrower than either of these, focusing only on the most vexed matters of a text, for example *Explaining Eight Difficult Points in [Nāgārjuna's] "Treatise on the Middle Way"*⁹ by Tsong-kha-pa. "Annotations" (*mchan 'grel*) is a form that provides either interlinear notes within the text itself,

⁵ Not to be confused with *gzhung bsgrigs*, to compile or compose texts.

⁶ For an example of contemporary oral commentary on the Sautrāntika chapter of Janggya's text, see Klein 1991. This book also contains oral commentary, drawn from several important Gelukba scholars, on a typical debate text, in this case the *Collected Topics from a Spiritual Son of Jam-yang-shay-ba* (*gomang yig chakun mkhyen 'jam dbyangs bshad pa'i thugs sras ngag dbang bkra shis kyis mdzad pa'i bsdus grva*) by Nga-wang-dra-shi (ngag-dbang-bkra-shis, 1648-1721), n.p., n.d. (available from Gomang College, Mundgod, India).

⁷ The "Norbu Ketaka" (*shes rab le'ui tshig don go sla bar rnam par bshad pa nor bu ke da ka*).

⁸ *phar phyin spyi don*.

⁹ *rtsa ba shes rab kyi dka' gnas chen po brgyad kyi bshad pa*.

or comprises a separate discussion (*zur mchan*) of the text, often moving between a focus on particulars or considering the meaning more broadly. A famous example is that of the seventeenth-century Gelukba scholar Ngawang Belden's (*ngag dbang dpal ldan*) *Annotations for (Jam-yang-shay-ba's) "Great Exposition of Tenets," Freeing the Knots of the Difficult Points, Precious Jewel of Clear Thought*.¹⁰ Well known as these genres are in the Geluk and other orders, they are not strictly defined, and often have overlapping functions; for example, the genre known as "Analysis" (*tha' dspyod*) is like a meaning commentary in the form of a debate,¹¹ an instance being Panchen Sönam Drakba's *Analysis of "Entrance to the Middle Way."*¹² Another example of overlapping functions is the *Annotations* mentioned above, which is also a commentary on the difficult points of its focal text.

The broadest genres of written commentary are known as "Explanatory Commentary" (*'grel bshad*) and "Instructions on the Explanation" (*bshad khrid*). Jayānanda's *Explanatory Commentary on the "Entrance," A Clarification of Meaning* can be given as an example of both types; that is, though the names accorded these forms differ, the actual instances of them are one and the same.¹³ Explanatory Commentaries and Instructions on the Explanation can be quite detailed but maintain an interest in the text as a whole. Both rubrics can also be applied to oral commentary with similar characteristics.

Oral commentarial genres also include *smar khrid*, meaning "rich, detailed" exposition, and *dmar khrid*,¹⁴ translated here as "essential instructions" but literally meaning "naked instruction" or, even more literally, "instructions getting to the red," and glossed as "getting behind the

¹⁰ *grub mtha' chen mo'i mchan 'grel dka' gnad mdud grol blo gsal gces nor.*

¹¹ Gen Yeshey Thabgey, Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, July 30, 1993.

¹² *dbu ma 'jug pa'i mtha' dpyo.*

¹³ How one refers to it simply depends on which aspect of its function one wishes to emphasize, that is, whether one emphasizes the explanations it itself contains, or the fact that it is an expansion of a particular text (Gen Yeshey Thabgey and Losang Tsyden, both students of Kensur Yeshey Tupden, Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, July 30, 1993; all subsequent quotations from Gen Yeshey Thabgey are from this conversation).

¹⁴ The title of the meditation text discussed below also includes this term.

flesh, naked, getting inside the meaning,”¹⁵ suggesting that like a surgeon’s knife these instructions open onto the red blood at the heart of a text. This oral form, important in Nyingma and Bön as well as Gelukba, is considered especially lucid, and is often more condensed than the genres just mentioned. An oral genre associated especially with meditation texts is “instructions of experience” (*myong khrid*), which incorporates the meditation of both students and teachers into the discussion. Although all these terms are widely used, their boundaries are not clearly fixed, nor are they necessarily used in the context of enacting the oral genre itself. Over a period of six years between 1980 and 1986 I periodically met with Kensur Yehsey Tupden, abbot emeritus of the relocated Loseling College in Drebung Monastic University in Mundgod, India, to hear his textual commentary on a major text of his tradition. During these years he never used any of these terms; he simply referred to our activity as “looking at the book” (*dpe cha lta*).

What marks textual oral commentarial style as “oral”? Certainly, text-based oral commentary departs dramatically from the “classical” characteristics of the oral as described by Walter Ong (1982). Contrary to the works of “oral cultures” as Ong describes them, textual oral commentary such as I have heard from Kensur Yeshey Tupden or numerous other Gelukba and Nyingma Tibetan scholars is not particularly marked by reliance on mnemonics or formulas or rhythm (33). Further, these oral expressions do not “carry a load of epithets” (38). They are not redundant (though they *are* copious) (39).¹⁶ Nor do these explanatory oral genres express their oral nature by being overly empathic or situational, nor are they experience-near. They stand also in adamant contradiction to Ong’s puzzling claim that “an oral culture has no vehicle so neutral as a list” (42). Nor are the oral expressions I have recorded “highly polarized” or revelatory of “the agonistic dynamics of oral thought” (45). In short, the scholarly oral material to which we refer here is far more “literary” than its “orality” might seem to indicate.

At the same time, for all their literary affinities, explanatory genres of scholarly oral commentary are intricately intertwined with ritual oral genres, wherein, as Ong would put it, the sacredness and power of sound

¹⁵ Gen Yeshey Thabgey.

¹⁶ Ong also says that oral cultures encourage “fluency, fulsomeness, volubility” (40-41).

are crucial elements. Further, though often as technical in vocabulary and overall intellectual reach as the written text in question, oral commentary is marked by a more expansive style and a willingness to try out ideas in a more experimental fashion than textual rigor allows. To the extent that a culture is oral, the immediacy with which it entertains its past dissolves some of the distance between past and present.¹⁷ As is well known, Ong, following Goody, describes oral cultures as homeostatic in that elements contradictory or irrelevant to contemporary ideas fall into disuse, leaving little evidence that they ever existed.¹⁸ This is to some extent descriptive of oral philosophical commentary in Tibet, and even of Tibetan textual commentary, which often had its origins in oral discourse. For example, Gelukba scholars today are extraordinarily erudite regarding diverse viewpoints within their own order, but they have long lost the Indian origins and often an awareness of various Tibetan permutations of many of their tenets. Oral or written, their commentary is highly nuanced philosophically, but the relatively weak emphasis on intellectual history is more akin to an oral orientation.

In addition, philosophical analysis is “homeostatic” in that while texts and their commentators frequently inquire into the logical consistency of various constructs, they do not erode the basic principles on which the argument is based. For example, there is much discussion regarding the compatibility between the doctrines of rebirth and of emptiness (how can the selfless person be reborn?), but I have never encountered a questioning of the fundamental principles of rebirth, or doubt in the possibility of highly developed states of concentration that aid one in ending the process of rebirth altogether. In a traditional Tibetan context, one hears about these with faith, with a mind that skillfully questions the logical outcome of specific propositions, but is unburdened or ungifted by a skepticism that

¹⁷ Lumpp 1976:25. I would not, however, follow Ong in suggesting that oral cultures necessarily are associated with “a cyclic understanding of time” or lack a sense of historicity. For example, this long-held generalization about India (in my estimation a secondary oral culture) has been admirably reconsidered in Collins 1991.

¹⁸ Goody and Watt refer to this as the “homeostatic adjustment” of past oral traditions to the present (1968:59).

would undermine the basic philosophical principles involved.¹⁹

Oral textual commentary is typically just as rigorous syntactically and conceptually as the text on which it is based. In giving it, the teacher draws on material from other texts which supplement, or are supplemented by, his own analyses developed over a lifetime. What chiefly distinguishes it from textual discussions are its responsiveness to questions asked, its reflection on a wider range of topics than any one text is likely to include, and the insertion of nontraditional examples, often from the lives of teacher or student, to illustrate his points. In addition the Lama adds to the reading an aura of kindness, humor, excitement, or severity, depending on his demeanor. This much is common wherever teachers lecture on texts. However, in Tibet, texts such as Tsong-kha-pa's are rarely left to speak for themselves, as texts so often are in modern secular contexts. Moreover, the "distance" between texts and persons is formulated differently than in the West. The traditional Lama "represents" the text in several senses: as often as not he has memorized it and may spontaneously recite portions of it or related texts in the course of oral commentary. Further, as a representative of the Buddha, his teaching, and his community of followers, the Lama embodies the text in concrete ways. He can in a very real sense be considered a "living text," and he teaches the texts he lives in order to produce more living approximations of the traditional values and forms of knowledge they elaborate. At the same time, the Lama whom the student regards as embodying the text also stands outside it, always taking a position of reverence toward it as he conveys to the student its meaning, whose profundity he may claim only partially to comprehend, much less embody.

In the Gelukba monastic setting, oral philosophical commentary is closely connected with another form of oral training, the daily and hours-long debates that provide an intellectual and social context for developing a

¹⁹ This is a difference Tibetans themselves perceive between their own and Western orientations: "In Tibet we accept many things that cannot be seen by the eye; the West does not accept many unseen things. This is the kind of difference there is" (Denma Lochö Rinboche, private taped conversation, June 1990, Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, Washington, New Jersey). Lobön Tenzin Namdag made the same point during a lecture for the Ligmincha Institute, July 17, 1992, Head Water, Virginia.

community of knowledge.²⁰ Whereas oral commentary transmits knowledge from one generation to another, debate solidifies learning among members of the same generation.²¹ Debate aims primarily to clarify the meaning of terms and textual passages, yet even this most technical and information-based form of speech typically begins with a ritual incantation of the syllable *dhīh*, which every Tibetan knows to be the “seed syllable” of Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of wisdom. Indeed, ritual and explanatory forms are rarely wholly separate.

In addition, focusing one’s attention on the spoken word of the teacher typically takes place in an arena suffused with sound. In a monastery, for example, the air is periodically filled with the reverberations of deep chanting, accompanied by drums and bells, or the incessant roar of verbiage from the debating courtyard. This barrage of sound lends richness to a setting otherwise relatively free of gifts for the senses (with the exception of elaborately adorned meditation halls, which, however, one must enter to be affected by). The sound, however, is everywhere. Listening to the commentary of Kensur Yeshey Tupden on the work of Tsong-kha-pa for example, our attention to the textual words, and my intent focus on his spoken commentary, was contextualized by rhythmic and melodic emanations from other quarters of the monastery, and by the saturation with vocalized sound that is a fact of daily life. It may even be that such a holistic experience with sound provides psychic nourishment that facilitates the long hours of textual study for which Tibetan monastic life is justly famous.

My point is that nonconceptual and ritual aspects of orality mingle in all areas of literary activity. Yet Gelukba understands spoken language and mere sound to affect the mind in quite different ways. Sound as such is an object of direct sense perception; meaningful speech must be processed by

²⁰ Debate itself thus occupies an interesting place between the written and the oral. Tibetan monastic debates can be considered a form of rhetoric. However, whereas Ong has noted that in the West “rhetoric retained much of the old oral feeling for thought” (1982:110), Tibetan stylistic debate was directly modeled on Indian forms of textual disputation that, however, may well have had their origins in spoken debate. For examples of how these forms are related, see Klein 1991. For detailed discussion of Tibetan debate, see Perdue 1992.

²¹ In some monastic colleges older students visit younger debaters to help them develop skills.

conceptual thought. Words and thoughts do not themselves directly get at actual objects, but produce meaning through the medium of an image that serves to exclude all objects but the one or ones in question.²² Oral explication also operates by way of such exclusion. Sound itself, however, including the sound of speech, is full of itself, with no need to proffer anything other than what it is.²³ In practice these epistemological processes are often combined, just as ritual and explanatory sound are inevitably intertwined.²⁴ Thus, in sitting for oral commentary, or in chanting the verses of a ritual, one engages in conceptual images and ideas, and also bathes in the positive manifestation of the sound that conveys these.

2. *Advisory Speech.* Oral textual instruction (*gzhung khrid*)²⁵ can be considered a form of advisory speech (*gdams ngag, upadeśa / avadāna ādeśa*), though advisory speech also includes discussions not directly linked with textual explication.²⁶ Advisory speech is associated with a wide range of philosophical, ritual, and meditational texts, and includes extemporaneous reflection independent of specific texts. A defining

²² For elaboration of this topic, see Klein 1986: espec. chs. 4 and 6.

²³ However, Tibetans will stop short of saying that, for example, Avalokiteśvara is present in the mantra associated with him, *om māṇi padme hūṃ*. Saying such a mantra causes help from the deity associated with it to flow to oneself but not, as in some forms of Hinduism, because the deity is *present* in the sound, but because hearing that sound is like hearing his or her own name, and he or she automatically responds to it (Denma Lochö Rinboche, Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, Washington, NJ, June 1990). This said, it should be noted that much of the veneration and ritual power Tibetans attribute to sound in general and mantra in particular is derived from the Indian ritual context. See for example Bharati 1965 and Gonda 1963; for an extensive discussion of whether or not a mantra is a speech act, see Alper 1989. For a stimulating discussion of mantra and its relation to *dhāraṇī*, see Gyatso 1992.

²⁴ More technically, this has to do with differences between direct perception, which is a complete engager (*sgrub 'jug kyi blo, *vidhipravrttibuddhi*) with its object, and conceptual thought, which approaches and isolates its object through a negative process, and which is known as a partial engager (*sel 'jug gi blo, *apohapravrtti*). For further Gelukba elaborations of this distinction, see Klein 1986.

²⁵ Often referred to as *dpe khrid*. According to Yeshey Thabgey, however, this is not a correct term.

²⁶ Khenbo Palden Sherab, December 1990, Houston, Texas.

characteristic of advisory speech is its simple effectiveness; it is described as “an especially quick and facile way of eliminating doubt.”²⁷ Its facility does not lie with the informative value of speech alone. As if underscoring this point the great fourteenth-century Nyingma scholar and meditation master Longchenba, contemporaneous with Tsong-kha-pa, notes that advisory speech has a particular connection with kindness.²⁸ A person without such kindly intention cannot convey the same potent effect, even using the very same words.

In its most specialized sense, “advisory speech” is said to be something that the Lama holds as secret, revealing it only to a heart-disciple who, on hearing it, can develop an understanding not previously accessed. This too occurs because of its special ability to cut off doubt. How much this “facile” elimination of doubt owes to the clarity of explanation and how much to timing and the charismatic presence of a teacher is an open question. In any case, the economy associated with such treasured precepts is the kind of economy usually associated with something alive, whose limited energy needs to be preserved for just the right occasion: “If a teacher has a dearly held precept, giving this precious thing to a student who then wastes it would be sad. When one finds a special student with faith, confidence, and understanding, then the teacher gives all these to that student.”²⁹

An important subgenre of advisory speech is known as direct speech (*man ngag*). The contemporary Gelukba scholar Gen Yeshey Thabgey glossed this genre as something easy to understand and capable of bringing one to complete understanding of a particular topic. He emphasized also that such direct speech must not be idiosyncratic to a particular Lama, but must accord with the Buddhist canon and the great books of the Lama’s tradition. A Nyingma text describes it as follows:

Its hardship is small, its import great,
Its approaches are multiple.
Easy to enact, difficult to encompass,

²⁷ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche, March 1991, Houston, Texas. All subsequent quotations from Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche are from this conversation.

²⁸ Last sentence from oral commentary on this verse by Khetsun Sangpo.

²⁹ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche.

This is direct speech.³⁰

“Focus your mind on tantra, scripture, and direct speech” writes Longchenpa, in which case “Buddhahood will be imminent.”³¹ In his *Treasure of Precious Direct Speech Instructions*,³² Longchenpa also lists “listening to the kindly direct speech of a Lama” first in a list of six helpful activities.³³

Direct speech, like advisory speech, often involves something that is usually held secret; something, in short, that is usually *not* spoken. Whatever its informative value, it has other sources of power as well. This quality is indicated by two different etymologies of “direct speech” (*man ngag*). In one, the first syllable *man* is said to signify “mantra” and the second syllable *ngag* signifies “speech,” including instructional speech. According to another explanation, the first syllable of the term *man* is related to the Tibetan word *sman*, spelled differently but pronounced the same, meaning “medicine.”³⁴ In both etymologies, a potency beyond conceptual import is indicated. As with anything potent, words or medicine, the effect can be good or bad. Thus one can speak of helpful direct speech (*phan ba’i man ngag*) as well as harmful or evil speech (*ngan*

³⁰ *tshegs chung don che thabs mang ba/bya ba sla dpag dka’ man ngag go*. From the *rDzogs chen a di bgod ba’i rgyud* in the *Nyingma rGyud ’bum*; recited by Khenbo Palden Sherab, oral commentary, December 1990, Houston, Texas. A similar description occurs in *Zab mo Yang Tig*, vol. 2: “*Tshegs chung la don che ba’i thabs dam pa’o*” (427.3—thanks to David Germano for this citation). A traditional etymology of “essential teachings” (*man ngag upadeśa*) indicates the diverse qualities of speech around which oral genres are grouped in Tibet.

³¹ Printed by Dodrup Chen Rinpoche, Gantok, Sikkhim, from blocks commissioned to Saraswati Block Makers, Lanaka, Varanasi 5, n.d., p. 5a.5-6

³² *man ngag rin po che’i mdzod*.

³³ 112.1; last sentence from oral commentary by Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche on this verse.

³⁴ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche.

ngag).³⁵

Whereas in the modern West the term “speech” refers almost exclusively to informative or conceptually communicative vocalization, the Tibetan term here translated as speech (*ngag*, *vāca*) is defined (in the oral tradition at least) in such a way as to account for both expository and ritual significance: “Because the Lama’s speech is the supreme eliminator of doubt, it is called *ngag*.”³⁶ In short, the ritual power of words does not preclude, but also does not depend on, their explanatory capacity.

B. Ritual Oral Genres

Sound is a special sensory key to interiority...
[that] has to do with interiors as such, which
means with interiors as manifesting themselves,
not as withdrawn into themselves, for true
interiority is communicative.³⁷

Advisory speech is a form that incorporates both explanatory and ritual aspects. There are also oral genres that do not “explain” at all. These genres are far less concerned with *what* the mind knows than with the *kind* of mind in question. For example, there are forms of oral expression primarily concerned with producing concentration rather than understanding. Such expressions tend to find their greatest usage outside of the Gelukba and sutric context of the Tsong-kha-pa’s text. They are significant aspects of tantric practice, and prominent also in Nyingma practices.

³⁵ Khetsun Sangpo noted that the terms “kindly speech” and “harmful speech” have the same meaning (etymologically) but their object of operation (*’jug yul*) is different. “Object of operation” is a term associated with Tibetan discussions of how *instructional* speech works. The explanation of oral genres has to be discussed in those terms. Yet these etymologies themselves are part of oral tradition.

³⁶ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche. This is an oral etymology, not clearly expounded in the texts. Rinboche notes that he speaks of this from his own experience. Texts do not give a clear etymology of *ngag* in this way, although there are occasional statements that it may be like that.

³⁷ Ong 1982:117.

1. *Scriptural Transmission.* Most textual encounters begin with an oral practice known as *lung*. This term translates the Sanskrit word *āgama*, literally meaning “scripture,” and *lung* is in fact the scriptural text itself in oral presentation, read aloud by a teacher to a student in order to create a connection with the entire vocal, scholarly, and ritual lineage of the text.³⁸ Only after receiving *lung* is one ready to hear oral commentary on the text, to study and debate its meaning and, if one chooses, incorporate it into a meditation practice. It is clear from the importance placed on this practice that, written or oral, a text is not words or meaning alone. Texts also include sound, power, and blessings. Unlike the purely visual text, which is distinctly “out there,” causing the reader to shift continuously between the external physical text and his or her own internal responses, the sonorous text occupies inner and outer space simultaneously, but not necessarily conceptual space. During the transmission of *lung* the text is read so rapidly that conceptual grasp of it is minimal; this is a time when the spoken word must be heard, not necessarily understood. Complete *lung* is achieved when recited by a teacher out of compassion for a student who has faith in that teacher and focuses full attention on the reading. Merely hearing the words, or mere unfeeling articulation of them, does not fully accomplish the giving of *lung*, although there may still be some effect.³⁹

In a looser interpretation it is said that as long as one has a “consciousness that apprehends sound” (*sgra 'dzin gyi shes pa*) one has received *lung*. This is because blessings are received through the sound itself, even though one has not understood the words.⁴⁰ To have the blessings means one has some power or capacity (*nus pa, śakti*) to profitably engage the text. Blessings and power are materially inseparable; both are united with sound.⁴¹

I did not receive a formal *lung* on Tsong-kha-pa's text, although Kensur Yeshay Tupden did read each passage aloud before discussing it,

³⁸ Indeed, the scriptural teaching (*lung gi chos, āgama-dharma*) has from at least the fourth century in India been one of two major divisions of Buddhist teaching, the other being the teaching that is realized (*rtogs kyi chos, adhigama-dharma*).

³⁹ Khenbo Palden Sherab, oral commentary.

⁴⁰ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche.

⁴¹ Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche. Because of its association with blessings and power, sound is considered a subtle type of form.

and according to Gen Yeshey Thabgey this too constitutes *lung*, as long as all the words are included. *Lung*, it is said, can be transmitted by anyone who has received it properly. Does this mean that I could read aloud Tsong-kha-pa's work and bestow *lung* on someone else? Gen Yeshey Thabgey and his student, Losang Tsayden laughed, perhaps uncomfortably, when I asked this. They may have laughed because this is not something a Tibetan layperson, especially a laywoman, would even think about in relation to himself or herself. Nevertheless, they stated that if I should do this it would indeed be *lung*, and that it would qualify even if I myself had not understood what I had heard, because the power (*nus pa, śakti*) and latencies (*bag chags, vāsanā*), aids to future practice carried by the sound, would still be imparted. However, since blessings in general depend both on the faith of the recipient and the good qualities of the giver, the issue of an ordinary layperson giving *lung* would not arise in Tibetan culture; there would always be qualified Lamas whose bestowal would be more effective.

At the same time, *lung* is not considered equally important for all texts. It is most significant for works directly related to practice, such as meditation texts or specific rituals. Denma Lochö Rinboche, who gave formal *lung* prior to his *khrid* (instruction) on the meditation text discussed below, had himself received *lung* on the *Stages of the Path (lam rim)* texts by Tsong-kha-pa, but not, as some Tibetans do, on the entire Canon of Buddha's word and its commentaries. He observed,

I have not received *lung* on the Kangyur and Tangyur. I did not place tremendous importance on that.... I have had it many many times on *The Path of Well-Being (bde lam)* and also on the books of Tsong-kha-pa and his spiritual sons. But not Kangyur and Tangyur. I have faith that there is *lung* and that it is good to receive it. Yet some hold it as extremely important in ways that I do not.⁴²

2. *Chanting*. There are forms of orality still less grounded in informative values than textual instruction, scriptural transmission, and advisory or direct speech. "Chanting" is a term I use to emphasize a focus on the musicality and rhythm of vocalized texts, as well as the repetitive chanting of mantras during ritual performance by a group or individual, or

⁴² Private conversation taped June, 1990, Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, Washington, NJ.

during a session of meditation.⁴³

Insofar as Buddhist philosophy is directed toward the nonconceptual and not only toward producing conceptual pyrotechnics (though these are present in abundance), the *tone* of philosophical expression is also important. The importance of recitation is a reminder that textual engagement does not always focus solely on a written text. In Tibet, as in many traditional cultures, the most essential religious, philosophical, or meditational texts are recited aloud from memory. Candrakīrti's *Entrance*, for example, would be memorized by monks in childhood or adolescence; years later, coming upon quotations embedded in a commentarial text, Candrakīrti's words ring in one's ear like the familiar lyrics of a song whose meaning is only now coming clear. Lugubrious as these texts often sound in English, most of them are poetry in Sanskrit and Tibetan. They can be recited rhythmically, making complex ideas music to the ears of those who hear and repeat them habitually. Memorized texts are said literally to be "held in mind." Such texts are also, in an important sense, held in the body. Chanting vibrates one's vocal cords and even some bones (Ackerman 1991). It can also take over one's inner "voice" and thereby mute or transform inner chatter that interferes with the concentration from which all meditative endeavor must flow.⁴⁴

In meditative rituals the chanting of liturgical texts or mantras has physical and mental effects that in some contexts (especially Nyingma) override their conceptual impact. Mantras in particular are important not simply for what they mean, but for how they sound and for how that sound resonates with the chanter's mind and body. It is well known that human organisms are profoundly affected by sound. If one sings along with or even just listens to Mick Jagger bellow "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," the effect is quite different than if one participates in a rendition of "Amazing Grace." The difference is real, palpable, and physiological. The Tibetan way of expressing something similar is to observe that because the body's inner currents affect the mind, one way to alter or subdue the mind is through breathing-and-chanting practices that, in conjunction with the

⁴³ For a study of the physiological and psychological effects of rhythm, see Jousse 1924/1990.

⁴⁴ We generally acknowledge the ability of sound to take over our interior in another way; in the presence of very loud noise we say "It's so loud I can't hear myself think." See, for example, Ihde 1976:espec. 133ff.

proper posture, help smooth out the movement of these currents by straightening the channels through which they move.

Meditation texts frequently alternate between descriptions of qualities cultivated, prayers to achieve these qualities, and depictions of the visualizations done in tandem with that recitation. All are chanted during the meditation session itself, and during such recitation the words of the text may seem to pass before the mind's eye, making it simultaneously an oral and a visual text.

Tantric meditation involves an intense visual, visceral, and spiritual identification with a particular deity. That deity is understood to body forth from a particular sound, namely the mantra that one recites as part of the practice. There are three styles of practice by which one enhances oral and visual emulation of the deity: (1) the "great emulation," so-called because it is done in a group, (2) recitation done alone, and (3) alternating between solitary and group practice.⁴⁵

Chanting is also done as a practice on its own, with concentration focused through the medium of sound itself. A particularly important form of recitation in Nyingma, and not present in Geluk,⁴⁶ is known as *dzab dbyangs* (pronounced *dzab yang* to rhyme with "up swung"). This word is the Tibetanized form of the Sanskrit *jāpa*, meaning "recitation of mantra." Here it is considered crucial to be precise about the rhythm, the melody, and, perhaps most of all, the junctures at which one inhales and exhales.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ From Khetsun Sangpo Rinboche's explication of the deity yoga associated with the practice of Hail Protection. According to Gen Yeshey Thabgey, Geluk speaks of *bsgrub chen* and *sgrub sogs* but not *dpa' bo gcig*, that is, they do not consider recitation done alone as a formal category (a different point from saying that individuals do not do recitation in their own personal practice).

⁴⁶ Gen Yeshey Thabgey.

⁴⁷ For example, an important Nyingma meditational practice for evoking the 100 Peaceful and Wrathful Deities who exist in the body involves such chanting. Simultaneous with the vocalization, one visualizes these figures at certain places in body. A similar effect occurs when chanting, for example, an ancient multi-line mantric poem known as the "Song of the Vajra" (*rdo rje glu*) in which the sound of every syllable is said to correspond to and affect certain parts of the body. This is a genre present in Nyingma and in Geluk Tantric practices, and I believe, though have not ascertained, that it exists in the other Tibetan religious traditions as well.

Such vocalization⁴⁸ is significant for its association with breath and other, subtler forms of physical energy (*rlung*). In this sense it mediates between mind and body and participates with both. The use of breath and *rlung* is primarily significant in tantric practice, and is also an important principle in oral recitation and mantric chant.

Many practices that emphasize sound are done in groups. Chanting with others makes sound a palpable element in ways not replicable in solitude. No wonder that, worldwide, song or other forms of vocalization are such important expressions of community. Joining one's voice with those of others, one is both an individual and part of a unity, and yet not quite either.

There are also sound practices done in solitude, often outdoors, that yield a different kind of experience. One's own sound emanates outward into space. As it fades away, the practitioner, still imaginatively extended over that space, is left in pithy silence. This silence is not an utter absence of sound, but the evanescent vanishing of the sound on which one's energy and attention had been focused. One rests the mind in this vivid and particular absence, a sensory analogue to settling the mind on emptiness, a practice that lies at the heart of both sutra and tantra. Emptiness too is a specific absence; it is not the lack of things in general, but of a characteristic described variously as substantial or inherent existence.

Chanting practices are premised on the efficacy of vocalized sound rather than on explication, on vocality over orality. Nevertheless, these are text-based practices, and instruction in them is received through a combination of scriptural transmission or *lung*, an initiation that is bestowed in part through speech, in part through the recitation of mantras and prayers, sometimes accompanied by drums, bells, or symbols, as well as through textual instruction, and including both advisory and direct speech. Again, no oral genre in Tibet is completely independent of the others.

Philosophical Assumptions about Subjectivity

Concentration is an important element in Buddhist practice. The quieting of the mind, whether merely through observing breath or through

⁴⁸ I use this term to signify oral genres in which sound is considered as or more important than meaning.

training in deep states of calm abiding and concentration, always accompanies the training in wisdom that is a central topic of Buddhist philosophical texts. It is interesting to consider the subjective category of concentration, and its relation to insight or wisdom, in light of the intertwining of oral and literary orientations by which that relationship is expressed.

Concentration, I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁹ is central to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism's claim that a direct perception of emptiness is an *unmediated* cognition. This tradition finds the perception or wisdom of emptiness to be unmediated in the sense that the object is known nonconceptually, that is, without the intervening presence of a thought-image that occurs in all conceptual responses to oral or written words. Perception of emptiness is also considered unmediated in the sense that it does not perpetuate features of the mental states that allowed it to become manifest, such as reliance on a thought-image, conceptual analysis, or a sense of separation between subject and object.

Calm abiding is the minimum level of quietude needed to directly experience emptiness. When a mind of calm abiding knows emptiness directly, its relationship to the emptiness, which is in a sense its "object," is different from that of most other subject-object relationships. It is not a basis for concentration. It is not an object in the way that a vase is a necessary condition for a valid visual impression, that is for an eye consciousness, of a vase. Thus, unlike in ordinary sensory and mental perception, the "object" here is not a *cause* of subjective experience during the higher stages of concentration; rather the subjective process unfolds through a power of its own. The nonconceptual or direct wisdom of emptiness can exist only when it is conjoined with such a calmed mind. Indeed, although the wisdom of insight is famous for being "inexpressible," its function is far more language-associated than the faculty of concentration that forms its basis. The ritual forms of speech, whose significance comes less from meaning than from rhythm, intonation, and performance, are often associated with the contemplative elements of mental development.

Training in the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions often emphasizes the complementary cultivation of concentration and wisdom. In

⁴⁹ I discussed the Gelukba premises for this claim in Klein 1992, from which portions of what follows are derived.

these descriptions, one gets the impression of two mounting spirals of mental functioning, each supporting and furthering the other. This internally stimulated energy reveals and expresses something about the nature of consciousness, just as a bird that flies at the sight of a cat reveals and expresses something about the nature of bird. It is an implicit principle in the literature on calming and concentration that consciousness does not have to be affected *by* an object in order to express its clarity and knowing.

The tradition associated with Tsong-kha-pa, fourteenth-century scholar, master practitioner, and teacher of the first Dalai Lama, speaks of a category of calming it calls the uncommon absorption of cessation. This is a form of concentration said to facilitate the “surpassing wisdom” that is the enhanced direct experience of emptiness associated with the sixth level of Bodhisattva training. It is a description of concentration unique to Tsong-kha-pa’s tradition. This very powerful form of concentration is distinguished from the cessation of discrimination and feeling described by Buddhaghosa in the *Path of Purification*, wherein nothing mental endures. Nor is this the cessation described by Vasubandhu in the *Treasury of Knowledge* as neither mind nor form. In contrast to both of these, the absorption of cessation *is a consciousness*.⁵⁰ It is, moreover, a consciousness no longer governed by the linear and subject-distancing characteristics of the visual senses. In the context of the bookish Gelukba monastic environment in which these descriptions were formulated and, to an unknown extent, practiced, this category also represents a movement beyond the powerful literary-visual orientation in which that tradition is largely embedded.⁵¹

As a category, this uncommon absorption of cessation serves to further interfuse the functions of calm abiding and special insight. Their initial union resulted in a type of subjectivity known as “special insight,” a

⁵⁰ See, for example, *Pan-chen bSod-nams-grags-pa, Resonse*, 51a. ff; “whatever is an absorption of cessation is not necessarily a nonassociated compositional factor” (*ibid.*: 52b.1-54a.4-54a.6; see also *idem, dbU ma’i spyi don* [General Meaning] 127.6ff., where he distinguishes between subject (*yul can ’gog snyoms*) and object (*yul ’gog snyoms*) cessations; and *rJe-btsun Chos-kyi-rgyal-mtshan, dKa’ gnad gsel byed*, 89a.3ff.

⁵¹ Indeed, the greater emphasis of Gelukba on the gradual path, and the enormous literary effort that went into charting the stages of the path, may itself partly be a reflection of the increased literary productivity that became possible after the second transmission of Buddhism to Tibet.

term that in both Tibetan and Sanskrit, as well as English, implicitly assimilates the function of calming to that of seeing. By contrast, on the sixth ground, the term “meditative equipoise,” which describes the uncommon absorption of cessation, assimilates, or even masks, the function of wisdom. In both cases, differential categories are maintained; wisdom does not *become* calming, and calming does not *become* insight. The two mental gestures—of withdrawing the mind in one sense and expanding its horizons in another—are entwined, not blended.

It is interesting to consider the two gestures of expansion and withdrawal in terms of the characteristics of oral and literary orientations. In the descriptions above, the relative linearity of the analytical side of practice is assimilated to the more mentally and physiologically global model of stabilizing. There is a sense, albeit limited, in which concentration coalesces with the experience of sound, and wisdom with the experience of sight. One cannot take this analogy too far, however, before it breaks down and, in the process, reveals the artificiality of the boundaries of sight, hearing, oral, and written. The point is that the interplay of oral and visual, of concentration and insight, is complex. That complexity is the focus of our next section.

Meditation Texts: Sight and Sound

The sensorium is a fascinating focus for cultural studies. Given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium exploited within a specific culture, one could probably define the culture as a whole in virtually all its aspects.⁵²

Having summarized a variety of oral and vocal genres associated with texts and the types of subjectivity discussed in Tsong-kha-pa’s and related works, let us consider the meditative context of a text in Tsong-kha-pa’s tradition. We take as our focus the First Panchen Lama’s *Path of Well-Being for those Travelling to Omniscience, Essential Instructions [dmar khrid] on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (byang chub lam gyi rim pa’i dmar khrid thams cad mkhyen par ’brod ba’i bde lam)*, usually referred

⁵² Ong 1967:6.

to simply as the *Path of Well-Being (bde lam)*.⁵³ This is an early seventeenth-century meditational text based on traditional Gelukba *lam rim* teachings that coalesce recitation, visualization, physical gesture, and the nonverbal interiority of concentration. All these functions can be incorporated in a Tibetan concept of “reading” because all are directly related with the texts that provide focus and structure in meditation. In another sense, “reading” is too limited a term because the primary modern Western (and therefore secular) use of this term typically excludes gestures central to the Tibetan context. The tension between these two readings of the act of reading is itself instructive and interesting.

The *Path of Well-Being*, or similar works, are familiar to all traditional readers of Tsong-kha-pa’s order. In a manner typical of Tibetan meditation texts, and in contrast to philosophical works such as Tsong-kha-pa’s *Illumination*, the *Path of Well Being* intersperses sections of general instruction or explanation with lines to be recited. In some meditation texts, the portions to be recited appear in larger typeface than the instructions that, once they become habit, recede to the background. For a Tibetan engaged with this text, the purpose is not to interpret the various understandings of wisdom and compassion it offers, nor to compare these with other texts familiar to him, even though such activity might indeed occupy a considerable amount of time. Insofar as one approaches this as a meditator, the wisdom and other qualities it describes are meant to be internalized. One’s attention is therefore directed through the text to oneself, and not only to oneself as an intellect, or as one is presently, but as one can imagine oneself becoming, and endowed with qualities that, aided by the text, one now takes steps to manifest.

The oral genre most closely associated with this and other meditation texts is known as “instructions of experience” (*myong khrid*),⁵⁴ mentioned

⁵³ Lo-sang-chö-gyi-gyal-tsen (*bLo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtsan* 1570-1661). This work has been translated, based on commentary by Denma Lochö Rinboche, by Joshua W.C. Cutler, Director of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in Washington, NJ. The phrase *bde lam* could be translated as “path of bliss,” but because here *bde ba* clearly includes the sense of well-being brought about by the earlier stages of the path, as well as the special bliss unique to its higher reaches, the broader term “well-being” has been used.

⁵⁴ The “of” used in translating this term is ambiguously multidirectional in order to suggest that the teaching comes from and is enriched by the teacher’s own past experience, though he will not necessarily describe or even refer to his own practice, and is also meant to

above as a form of advisory speech unique to meditation texts. In the course of oral instruction, the entire text is commented on by the teacher and read silently by the student. In meditation sessions, done alone or with a group, one recites the appropriate portions and puts the instructions on compassionate motivation, visualization, and so forth into practice.

Instructions of experience have a particular structure.⁵⁵ In session A the teacher discusses a portion of the text and closes with a summary of what has been said. In the interval before the next session, the student meditates on the meaning of that segment of the text as illuminated by oral instruction and tries to gain an experiential taste of what has been discussed. In session B the teacher opens with a summary of the previous day's discussion, now perhaps heard differently because of the intervening meditation, and then about midway the lecture turns to new material, which is then summarized at the close of the lecture. This new material becomes the focus of meditation prior to lecture C.

Like many texts used in meditation, the Panchen Lama's text contains a liturgy that is chanted rhythmically during a meditation session, and also offers instructions or observations that shape the meditation session but are not themselves recited during it. Before one attempts to perform the text in meditation, one receives scriptural transmission (*lung*, *āgama*), and instruction (*khrid*) and then studies the work in its entirety, usually with the benefit of oral commentary.

A. The Meditator and the Text

Once one has received instructions on a text such as the *Path of Well-Being*, one is ready to use it in private sessions of meditation. These will involve periods of visualization and concentration, as well as recitation of the text and reflection on its meaning. Knowledge of the words will not suffice; one must know the melody and rhythm with which to chant them,

produce certain experiences for the listener-mediator in the future.

⁵⁵ This discussion is based on the Denma Lochö Rinboche's teaching of the *Path of Well-Being bDe Lam* at the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, Washington, NJ, in the summer of 1990. Along with Elizabeth Napper and Joshua Cutler, I was one of the oral translators of his lectures. This text has been translated by Joshua Cutler (unpublished ms.).

as well as the posture, gestures, and visualized images that accompany them. Doing this properly involves both conceptual understanding and focused concentration.

A Gelukba trainee would have studied and orally debated the topics of meditation, and listened to oral philosophical commentary on them as well. In addition, one would have studied and heard oral commentary on Tsongkha-pa's *Lam Rim* and other texts. Like these and other works modeled on Candrakīrti's chronicling of the Bodhisattva stages, the *Path of Well Being* presents an ordered series of meditations for the practitioner to follow. The multiplicity of media involved here—vocal, intellectual, nonconceptual, kinesthetic, visual, olfactory (often incense will be burned), and even gustatory (in longer group recitations monks are usually served tea at specific junctures)—is obvious. Their interplay is altogether typical of Tibetan religious practice.

The text proceeds through the stages of practice common to the *Lam Rim* cycle. Each of its topics⁵⁶ is presented as a four-part segment: preparation, actual session, conclusion, and instructions on what to do between meditative sessions. One is instructed to sit on a “comfortable cushion” in the lotus or other posture “that puts you at ease.” As the practitioner knows from other texts and from the example of those around him, this posture requires, above all, that the back be straight, the shoulders even and relaxed, the neck slightly arched, the chin lowered, and the mouth relaxed. This is the kinesthetic frame for the rest, providing, among other things, a maximal echo chamber for vocalization as well as a stillness of body likely to facilitate stillness of mind and clarity of attention.

The body accounted for, one next examines one's mind and develops a virtuous intention. This intention is itself “textualized” through the many

⁵⁶ These topics include: instructions on relying on a spiritual teacher, an exhortation to utilize the special situation of leisure and opportunity that makes practice possible, training in the contemplations of impermanence and death, the suffering of the bad rebirths, going for refuge, and developing conviction in the cause and effect of actions (*karma*). One then goes on to train in a desire for liberation and its associated practices; when this is complete one begins the practices unique to the Mahāyāna. These are (1) the development of the compassionate or altruistic determination to seek enlightenment in order to be in a position to maximally help and benefit all living beings; (2) having developed this intention, carrying it out by training in the Bodhisattva deeds, also known as the six perfections; (3) in particular training in the last two perfections, namely, calm abiding, described as the “essence of concentration,” and special insight, described as the “essence of wisdom.”

written and oral commentaries the practitioner would have heard regarding the compassionate motivation that sustains all Mahāyāna practice. In other words, one's reflection at this point, even if neither a reading nor a recitation, would most likely echo standard Mahāyāna phrases such as "For the benefit of all beings," "May all beings have happiness," and so forth that appear throughout Gelukba and other Tibetan Mahāyāna literature.

Next comes instruction on visualization: in the space directly before one's eyes the image of one's own teacher or teachers—including the one who gave instructions on text—appear in the form of Shakyamuni Buddha. Here the meditator must call upon visual texts, paintings or statues familiar since childhood, which one has perhaps recently studied again to refresh memory of particular details. Shakyamuni Buddha is in this visualization surrounded by the entire lineage of figures associated with *The Path of Well-Being* and its traditions. In front of each of these many teachers "upon marvelous tables are their own verbal teachings in the form of volumes that [like all visualizations] have the nature of light." Texts are visualized as part of a tableau that is itself a text. In its visualized presence one reflects on and recites the appropriate words.

While still sustaining this image, the practitioner is instructed by the text to "offer the seven branches of worship along with the mandala..."⁵⁷ The text does not elaborate, because anyone trained in this tradition would know from other texts as well as personal instruction how to enact the recitation, hand gestures, and visualization that these seven branches involve. Thus the simple words "offer the seven branches of worship along

⁵⁷ The seven branches of worship are: refuge, mental or physical prostration, offering, confession or purification of nonvirtue, rejoicing in one's own and others' virtues, requesting the Lamas to continue to teach, requesting one's teacher to have a long life, and, finally, dedication of the merit of all acts of body, speech, and mind for the benefit of living beings. One then offers a mandala, representative of the entire world, including the objects of the senses of that world, to those Lamas and Buddhas. These are described in the oral commentary of Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey in classes at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, July, 1971. See Dhargyey 1974.

Physical gestures of *mudra* are also involved, for example the offerings that comprise the second of the branches are indicated by a flowing set of hand gestures that symbolize the traditional seven offerings. These are water for drinking, water for washing, flowers, incense, light, perfume, and food, and are typically symbolized on an altar by seven bowls of water. An eighth offering, sound, is not symbolized through form since sound itself has no visible form. (Geshe Rabten, oral commentary and demonstrator of the *mudras*, summer, 1971, Dharamsala, India).

with the mandala” encompasses a considerable range of oral and textual traditions. The “inter-orality” implied here is compounded insofar as these seven branches themselves incorporate verses from the eighth-century Indian Buddhist poet, scholar, and meditation master Śāntideva.

Rays of light are then visualized to arise from one’s own heart, reaching the figures imagined before oneself, who thereby transform into light and dissolve onto the Lama visualized above one’s head. Then, imagining one is reciting in unison with the vast array of beings on whose behalf one altruistically undertook the practice, several verses of supplication to the visualized Buddhas are rhythmically chanted. As chanting ends, five-colored rays extend their radiance through infinite space to purify oneself and all living beings. In particular, they purify those limitations that would interfere with accomplishing the purpose of that particular session, for example, with the development of compassion, calm abiding, or special insight.⁵⁸

With minor differences, the same preparation of posture and visualization are used for all the meditative topics of this text.⁵⁹ In between the meditative sessions described in the *Path of Well-Being*, one is asked to study relevant scriptures and commentaries, or to engage in other appropriate activities such as restraining the senses through mindfulness and introspection, or “eating moderately and making effort at the yogas of not

⁵⁸ Note the interlacing and repetitiveness; one has already taken refuge and already cultivated the compassionate aspiration of a Bodhisattva when one “cultivates” it in this sequence. Such reiteration is typical of an oral/rhetorical strategy.

⁵⁹ In addition, the preparatory section on calm abiding notes the importance of finding “an isolated place that you find agreeable” and reducing one’s desire for objects of the senses, then sitting in the lotus posture and quieting thoughts by observing three sets of inhalation and exhalation through the left nostril, the right nostril and both nostrils, and then observing 21 breaths (416ff). The precise instructions on “quieting the winds” are not included in the text, but were given by Denma Lochö Rinboche in teaching the text. See Cutler 1989:60, n. 15.

The meditative sessions focused on special insight involve a rigorously text-based but otherwise free-form analysis on the meaning of emptiness. (For an extensive discussion of this analysis see Hopkins 1983.) Once conceptual understanding arises, one stabilizes one’s mind on that meaning. In this way the practitioner alternates between conceptual analysis and mental concentration, technically known as analytical and stabilizing meditation. These two kinds of subjectivity are, as we have seen, crucially addressed in both the letter and media of textual and meditative engagement.

sleeping and of bathing and eating.” In other words, “really” engaging the text means not only reading but incorporating such non-literary agendas as posture, recitation, movement, and behavior. At the same time, one is engaged in a complex intertextuality that assumes knowledge of other ritual, philosophical, or oral texts. Performing these is in Tibet the time-honored way of fulfilling the purpose of the “reader” and believer who engages with that text.

B. The Context of the Senses

Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer.⁶⁰

If, as Walter Ong suggests, sight is the sensory mode most associated with literacy, and hearing with orality, then the intertwined practices of reading, recitation, chanting, accompanying gesture, and visualization suggest the unique situation of Tibet’s monastic and literary communities as sites dedicated to literacy and flooded with orality/vocality. At moments when the hands and voice are still, however, visualization practices in Tibet typically include a phase in which visions themselves literally pour into the meditator, or the meditator may visualize herself as dissolving into the figure imagined before her. In this way the visual, which in general entails some distance between observer and observed, takes on characteristics usually associated with sound: one is situated in the midst of it, is gradually suffused by it, and then experiences the fading of visualized images into space, much as one hears sound drift toward silence. This consonance between sensory experiences that are ordinarily different has its own affective power.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ong 1982:74.

⁶¹ Likewise, the omniscient mind of a Buddha, like sound, is said to be all-encompassing. Unlike linear writing or ordinary conceptuality it does not proceed from one point to another, from past to future, but simultaneously encompasses the past, the present, and future. One could also say, though it would not be possible to argue this systematically, that the intertwining of aural and visual functions is an index of Tibet’s situation betwixt and between powerful oral-aural *and* visual-textual orientations. Further, this interfusion of the visual and aural may be analogous to the third of Ong’s cultural stages, electronic, where once again words and images can be embodied, can even surround

These visualizations, formalized and embedded in verbal descriptions, emerge as a kind of illuminated text that is “read” not just with ears or eyes, but with the entire mind and body, which itself becomes imaginatively transformed in the process of visualization. The meditators to whom such texts are addressed thus interact with them in a manner neither altogether writerly nor readerly, but physiological and meditative.

In visualization one’s most private, profound, and “interior” experiences—those of meditation—are expressed and elicited through particular images. As with the kind of reading attributed to “writerly” texts, there is an ongoing process of interaction and mutual change between the reader/meditator and the texts/images. The visualized images are in some sense experienced as “out there” as if available to all, though at the same time they are understood to be the effect of one’s own mind.⁶² My point is that even works studied primarily as philosophical texts, or oral commentary valued primarily for its explanatory import, are associated with ritual forms of orality. This conjunction would be part of what the hearer/student brings to any textual encounter.⁶³

The process of embodied visualization, like the textual and oral orientations that contextualize it, engages several dimensions of experience. The person is constructed by the text and its accompanying oral traditions as a meditator as well as a reader and also, given the related emphasis on posture, breath, and chanting, and on the receiving of *lung* and initiation through sound and gesture, as an embodied meditator. He or she is also, however, constructed as a philosopher who has read, debated, and understood a variety of interrelated texts and brought their ideas to a level of visceral understanding. The same person, engaged in visualization, can also be constructed as an artist who uses a trained imagination rather than a brush, with a visualized expanse as canvas. In this way one creates the image one has seen in paintings and whose descriptions one has read in texts. Ong observes that peoples from primary oral cultures are likely to externalize their psychological imbalances whereas literate cultures create

one as in the computerized, holistic construction of “virtual reality.”

⁶² Indeed, the most accomplished meditators are said to be able to cause others to see emanations from their own minds.

⁶³ In Ong’s terms Tibet is a visual/oral or secondary oral culture, in which the oral/aural dimension of communication coalesces to a certain extent with the visual orientation of print culture (Lumpp 1976:18).

persons who, regarding their own interior consciousness as private, like the pages of a text read silently and in solitude, experience themselves as “holding” individual characteristics unseen by others.⁶⁴ Traditional Tibet was *not* a primary oral culture, yet its oral orientation was sufficiently strong that if Ong is right about how such an orientation can shape interiority, the visualizations and associated textual practices just described would resonate differently for traditional Tibetans than for modern Westerners.

A visualized figure, male or female, Buddha or Bodhisattva, is experienced as embodying the qualities one seeks to incorporate, especially compassion and wisdom in unity. But this visualized figure is not a symbol only; he or she is a reflection of one’s own mind as well as a projection from one’s own mind. One relates to him or her as a person, pouring out faith, respect, joy, in some cases even desire, to that person.⁶⁵

The meditator and visualized image come to resemble each other more and more, finally dissolving one into the other, thus leaving the practitioner in a nonconceptual contemplation of their absence. Language, whether the written language of texts or words orally recited, does not in the end so much govern the process of visualization and meditation as dissolve into it. In this sense visualization, like the cultivation of concentration, though initiated through language, proceeds on a trajectory that moves further and further away from governance by language.⁶⁶ Yet

⁶⁴ This is a most interesting idea that probably needs further documentation; see the discussion by Ong 1982:69, citing Carothers 1959.

⁶⁵ The aesthetic function here is rather like that of the artists in Mikhail Bakhtin’s description (1990:102): “Lived experiences, when experienced outside myself in the other, possess an inner exterior, an inner countenance adverted toward me, and this inner exterior or countenance can be and should be lovingly contemplated, it can be and should be remembered the way we remember a person’s face (and not the way we remember some past experience of our own), it can be and should be made secure, given a form, regarded with loving-mercy, cherished with our inner eyes, and not our physical outward eyes.”

⁶⁶ In the act of visualization, the meditator is rather like an artist described by Bakhtin: “language-consciousness is no more than a constituent, a material that is totally governed by the purely artistic task.” For Bakhtin, “the author’s creative consciousness is not a language-consciousness (in the broadest sense of the word); language-consciousness is merely a passive constituent in creative activity—an immanently surmounted material” (1990:194).

all this is encompassed by traditional forms of textual engagement, texts that may describe the subject state of concentration or form part of the basis for cultivating it.

Summary: Reading in Tibet

We have seen that Tibetan texts are typically performed in multiple ways. They can be read, silently or aloud, and if aloud, either in a drone or musical incantation; their descriptions can be visualized, instructions enacted in silent meditation, or accompanied by chants and music. Sound and words enliven not simply textual performances but the larger environment in which performances typically take place.

For all these reasons, the modern secular construct of “reading” seems inadequate to describe Tibetan textual engagement. The face-to-face and often ritualized encounter with the person whose oral commentary is integral to the experience of text is one differentiating factor; another and even more significant difference is what occurs through repeated practice of the text, that is, through performing the procedures it teaches, including recitation, visualization, and conceptual training. One is not so much reworking the written text—although this is a crucial and fundamental practice in many quarters—as reworking the self. Nor does the usual meaning of “reading” illuminate the nonconceptual processes of calming, breathing, concentration, and mental intensity so central to meditative textual practices.

Further, such meditative texts are never really extractable from the oral forms that make them part of interpersonal as well as intra-subjective communication. Partly because of the pervasive intermingling of oral and written orientations, one is rarely left alone with a text as is the custom in Western contexts. Perhaps this overwhelming enthusiasm for interpreting texts is an attempt to break out of that lonely encounter, even though the result is often simply to be alone with another text. The oral forms discussed here produce a field in which “reading” engages multiple media, senses, and persons, becoming an experience that reverberates through one’s body as well as through various types of subjectivity.

The investigation of orality’s place in the process of “reading” provides a pertinent cross-cultural perspective from which to consider the kind of reciprocity between reader and text that is a hallmark of

contemporary literary theory. In Euro-American literary circles, this reciprocity means in general that texts are not produced only by their authors, but that a reader also is, in Roland Barthes' phrase, "the producer of a text."⁶⁷ This perspective refers primarily to the way in which a reader "produces" texts through a process of *interpretation*, and what is produced is another text, different in meaning but not in form from the first. But in the Tibetan religious context the object of production is not a new reading or interpretation, and thus not precisely a new text, but a new experience or insight, even new ways of breathing and being. ("New," however, means "new for the individual involved"; the production of "novelty" that expresses one's new and unique interpretation is not the goal.⁶⁸) It is also clear that the meditator-chanter-philosopher is not treated as a disembodied mind, as the reader of Western texts most typically is constructed, but very much as a material as well as a spiritual being. It is partly the interplay between oral and written gestures, as well as between concentration and insight, that in Tibet allows the faithful⁶⁹ to produce a multi-media text as well as new forms of subjectivity through various kinds of *activities* done in connection with that text.

We have noted that oral explanations of meditation texts are typically repeated three times, in between which repetitions one meditates on the topic discussed. For the person alternately constructed as a meditator and a listener, each hearing is a different experience. Within the Buddhist tradition, this is probably the most important way in which a text "differs from itself" (Johnson 1980:4). Such differences may be described as experiential rather than textual, involving nuanced shifts in social, physical, and mental states.

The text's table of contents, usually memorized at the beginning of one's study, lists the stages of practice. Reading or reciting this, the

⁶⁷ Discussed in Johnson 1980:5ff. Texts not susceptible to such rewriting by a reader Barthes calls "readerly." For him a "readerly" text is a product consumed by the reader; by contrast, "writerly" texts emerge through a process in which the reader also becomes a producer.

⁶⁸ Thanks to Janet Gyatso for stimulating this insight.

⁶⁹ Obviously, not a category appropriate for most western "readers." Although it cannot be developed here, this is another "difference that makes a difference" between modern and traditional forms of reading.

practitioner experiences a description of her own future as a meditator, and then begins to enact this future by “meditating” the text, a process embedded in the traditional Buddhist formula of “hearing, thinking, and meditating.” Like a reader, a meditator’s experience is not preordained by the nature of the text; there are bound to be resistances, complications, or shifts in perspective that the text precipitates but does not explicitly anticipate or acknowledge.

In addition to being “read” differently by one’s present and future self, the text is felt differently by different aspects of oneself engaged in practice, and by internal resistances that are opposed to the discipline, goals, or other elements of practice. Contemporary Western literary theorists tease out with great skill the hidden but implicit perspectives that contradict the overt message of the text. This difference is how a text differs from itself. Such reading makes it possible to experience the multiplicities that exist within an apparently singular text. As Barbara Johnson puts it, “A text’s difference is not its uniqueness, its special identity, but its way of differing from itself. And this difference is perceived only in the act of rereading” (1980:4). Similarly, but differently, there are “differences” that appear only through the act of performing and re-performing the practices described in a meditative text.

In brief, the boundaries taken for granted in reading, writing, and other forms of creativity performed in a Western print-oriented environment seem not to obtain here. Philosophical texts and oral explication of them are often dense and turgid, yet these qualities are much mitigated, in my experience, by being embedded in traditions of interpersonal communication and meditative enactment. Textual expression in Tibet should always be understood as part of this larger system of the visual and the aural. To take account of this context, and especially of the variety of oral genres that supplement the written, is to be aware that the ideal “reader” is not addressed only as a disembodied mind. She or he is evoked also as a physical presence, seated erectly and breathing deeply, vocalizing with rhythmic precision chosen words received not only from texts, but personally transmitted in the voice of one’s own teacher, thereby connecting him or her with a dimension not encompassed by the textual or conceptual, and so reinforcing one of the central premises, expressed variously in numerous Buddhist traditions, namely that the mind of the

subject is not enhanced through words alone.⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ An expanded version of this article will appear as the introduction to Klein 1994. The body of this book is the most elaborate written record of Tibetan oral scholarship in a Western language. My thanks to Professors Werner Kelber and Martin Jaffee for the encouragement and suggestions they offered as I was preparing this article.

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