

Introduction

ORAL AND TEXTUAL GENRES: BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF READING IN TIBET

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.

—Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

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.

—William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*

Kensur Yeshey Tupden's oral scholarship on a major text of his tradition invites us to consider the place of orality in Tibetan scholarly traditions, and especially the relationship between oral genres and the philosophical categories and ritual expressions of Tibetan Buddhism. I see Tibetan oral genres as falling into two broad categories. The first is explanatory, such as the oral philosophy translated here, and its primary purpose is to amplify the meaning of a text. The second is more ritualistic, for it includes vocalizations in which sound rather than meaning is paramount, such as the recitation of mantra or other rhythmic chanting.

Tibetan oral performances vary considerably in 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 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 to *read* a text such as Tsong-kha-pa's in a Tibetan context? 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 of this introduction we consider central philosophical principles of Tsong-kha-pa's text, focusing on how its discussions of subjectivity are compatible with textual practices that include oral, conceptual, meditative, and sensory processes. The final segment of this introduction illustrates how these processes intermingle in a widely used meditation text from Tsong-kha-pa's 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.

I. 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.

—Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*

1. *Textual Commentary.* Kensur Yeshey Tupden's reflections here are an example of "textual commentary" (*gzhung khrid*).¹ In this genre, a work like Tsong-kha-pa's serves as a basis for lectures by a teacher or, in more intimate circumstances, for a series of discussions between student and teacher.² Such oral philosophy replicates, questions, and expands on the text at hand, partly by bringing related texts into the discussion, partly through the teacher's own reflections on the text. The richness of this oral scholarship derives in large measure from its capacity to integrate the major genres of *written* textual commentary. Therefore, we can best consider this and other 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; for example, Mipham’s *Word Commentary on the “Wisdom” Chapter [of Śāntideva’s ‘Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds’]* “*The Norbu Ketaka*” (*shes rab le’ui tshig don go sla bar rnam par bshad pa nor bu ke da ka*). A “meaning commentary” (*don ’grel*) does not comment on every word but expands on a text’s central issues, for example Panchen Sönam Drakba’s (*pan chen bsod nams grags pa*) *General Meaning of [Maitreya’s] ‘Ornament for Clear Realization’* (*phar phyin spyi don*). 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 Tsong-kha-pa’s *Explaining Eight Difficult Points in [Nāgārjuna’s] ‘Treatise on the Middle Way’* (*rtsa ba shes rab kyi dka’ gnas chen po brgyad kyi bshad pa*). “Annotations” (*mchan ’grel*) is a form that provides either interlinear notes within the text itself, or comprises a separate discussion (*zur mchan*) of the text, often moving between a narrow focus on particular issues and a broader perspective on their import. A famous example of this is 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* (*grub mtha’ chen mo’i mchan ’grel dka’ gnad mdud grol blo gsal gces nor*). 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” (*mtha’ dpyod*) is like a meaning commentary in the form of a debate³—for instance, Panchen Sönam Drakba’s *Analysis of (Candrakīrti’s) ‘Entrance to the Middle Way’* (*dbu ma ’jug pa’i mtha’ dpyod*). Another instance 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* (*dbu ma ’jug pa’i ’grel bshad*) can be given as an example of both types—that is, though the names of these forms differ the actual instances of them (*mtshan gzhi, lakṣya*) are the same.⁴ 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*,⁵ 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 flesh, naked, getting inside the meaning,”⁶ suggesting that like a surgeon’s knife these instructions open onto the red blood at the heart of a text. The meditation text discussed

below, for example, calls itself a *dmār khrid* on the path to enlightenment. This oral form, important in Nyingma and Bön as well as Geluk, 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 the names of these genres are widely used, their boundaries are not clearly fixed, nor are they necessarily used in the context of enacting the oral genre itself. I consider Yeshey Tupden’s commentary an explanatory commentary within the larger genre of textual instructions, but Yeshey Tupden himself never used any of these labels in our years of working together. He simply called our activity “looking at the book” (*dpe cha lta*).

What marks Yeshey Tupden’s style as “oral”? Certainly, Tibetan text-based oral commentary departs dramatically from the “classical” characteristics of the oral noted by Walter Ong.⁷ Contrary to the works of “oral cultures” as Ong describes them, neither Tsong-kha-pa’s writing nor Kensur Yeshey Tupden’s discussion of it is marked by reliance on mnemonics, formulas, or rhythm.⁸ Further, Yeshey Tupden’s words do not “carry a load of epithets”;⁹ they are not redundant (though they *are* copious).¹⁰ The material here does not express its oral nature by being overly empathetic or situational, and it is not experience-near. Kensur’s commentary also stands in adamant contradiction to Ong’s puzzling claim that “an oral culture has no vehicle so neutral as a list.”¹¹ Nor are the written and oral expressions recorded here “highly polarized” or revelatory of “the agonistic dynamics of oral thought.”¹² In short, the scholarly oral material with which we are dealing here is far more “literary” than its rubric of “orality” might suggest. For all their literariness, however, 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 are crucial elements. Further, though often as technical in vocabulary and overall topic matter as the written text in question, scholarly oral commentary is marked by a more expansive style, 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 past¹³ dissolves some of the distance between past and present. Ong, following Goody, describes oral cultures as homeostatic in that elements contradictory with or irrelevant to contemporary ideas fall into disuse, leaving little evidence that they ever existed.¹⁴ This is to some extent descriptive of oral philosophical commentary in Tibet, and even of 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 largely lost the Indian origins and various Tibetan permutations of many of their tenets. Oral or written, their commentary is highly nuanced

philosophically, but the relatively small 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 which aid one in ending the process 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 would undermine the basic philosophical principles involved (much as the European Enlightenment did not question the value of reason).¹⁵

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 the explanations contained in texts 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 unique examples, often from the lives of teacher or student, to illustrate the teacher’s 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. In addition, 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 which foster an intellectual and social context for developing a community of

knowledge.¹⁶ Whereas oral commentary transmits knowledge from one generation to another, debate solidifies learning among members of the same generation.¹⁷ 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, by contrast, is everywhere. As I listened to the commentary of Kensur Yeshey Tupden on this work by Tsong-kha-pa, for example, our attention to the textual words and my intent focus on his spoken commentary were contextualized by rhythmic and melodic emanations from other quarters of the monastery, and by the saturation with vocalized sound that one lives in day by day. It may even be that such a holistic experience with sound provides psychic nourishment which 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, Geluk understands spoken language to affect the mind quite differently than mere sound. Sound as such is an object of direct sense perception, whereas meaningful speech must be processed by conceptual thought. That is, words and thoughts do not themselves directly get at actual objects, but produce meaning through the medium of an image (*don spyi, arthasāmānya*) which serves to exclude all objects but the one or ones in question.¹⁸ Oral explication also operates by way of such exclusion. Sound alone, however, including the sound of speech, is full of itself, with no need to proffer anything other than what it is.¹⁹ In practice these epistemological processes²⁰ are often combined, just as ritual and explanatory sound are inevitably intertwined. 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 khrīd*)²¹ 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.²² Advisory speech is associated with a wide range of philosophical, ritual, and meditational texts, and includes extemporaneous reflection

independent of specific texts. A defining characteristic of advisory speech is its simple effectiveness; it is described as “an especially quick and facile way of eliminating of doubt.”²³ This 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.²⁴ 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 which 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶

An important sub-genre of advisory speech is known as direct speech (*man ngag*). Gen Yeshey Thabkey glossed this genre as something easy to understand and capable of taking you through 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 Kangyur, Tangyur, and the great books. A Nyingma text describes it like this:

Its hardship is small, its import great,
Its approaches are multiple.
Easy to enact, difficult to encompass,
This is direct speech.²⁷

“Focus your mind on tantra, scripture, and direct speech,” writes Longchenba, in which case “Buddhahood will be imminent.”²⁸ In his *Treasure of Precious Direct Speech* (*man ngag rin po che'i mdzod*), Longchenpa also lists “listening to the kindly (*brdzal*) direct speech of a Lama” first in a list of six helpful activities.²⁹

Direct speech, like advisory speech, often involves something which 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 is indicated by two different etymologies of “direct speech” (*man ngag*). In one, the first syllable, *man*, is said to signify “mantra”; 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.”³⁰ 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 ngag*).³¹

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*.”³² 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.

—Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*

Advisory speech is a form that incorporates both explanatory and ritual aspects. There are also oral genres which 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 Geluk and sutric context of the Tsongkha-pa’s text. They are significant aspects of tantric practice, and prominent also in Nyingma practices.

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.³³ Only after receiving *lung* is one ready to hear oral commentary on the text, to study and debate its meaning and, if one chooses, to 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.³⁴

In a looser interpretation it is said that as long as one has a “consciousness which 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.³⁵ To have the blessings means one has some power or capacity (*nus pa, śakti*) to engage the text profitably. Blessings and power are materially inseparable, both are united with sound.³⁶

I did not receive a formal *lung* on Tsong-kha-pa’s text, although Kensur Yeshey Tupden did read each passage aloud before discussing it, and according to his senior student Gen Yeshey Thabkey, 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 Thabkey 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 responded 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, but 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 said,

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 the 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.³⁷

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 the focus on the musicality and rhythm of vocalized texts, as well the repetitive chanting of mantras during ritual performance by a group or individual, or during a session of meditation.³⁸

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 very 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; when they come upon quotations years later embedded in a commentarial text, Candrakīrti’s words ring in their 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” (*blo la ’dzin*). Such texts are also, in an important sense, held in the body. Chanting vibrates one’s vocal cords and even some bones.³⁹ It can also take over one’s inner “voice” and thereby mute or transform the inner chatter that interferes with the concentration from which all meditative endeavor must flow.⁴⁰

In meditative rituals the chanting of liturgical texts or mantras has physical and mental effects which 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 bellowing “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 to this is to observe that because the body’s inner currents (*rlung, prāṇa/vāyu*), affect the mind, one way to alter or subdue the mind is through breathing-and-chanting practices that, in conjunction with the 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 those qualities, and depictions of visualizations done in tandem with the 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 which 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 (*bsgrub chen*); (2) recitation done alone (*dpa' bo gcig*), and (3) alternating between solitary and group practice (*bsgrub sogs*).⁴¹

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,⁴² is known as *dzab dbyangs*. 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 takes breath.⁴³ Such vocalization⁴⁴ 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 in 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 which emphasize sound are done in groups. Chanting with others makes sound a palpable element in ways not replicable in solitude. It is no wonder that, worldwide, song or other forms of vocalization are important expressions of community. Joining one's voice with 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, which 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 which 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 which Tsong-kha-pa, following other Mādhyamika sources, explains as a lack of 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 on them is received through a combination of scriptural transmission, or *lung*, and initiation (*dbang, abhiṣeka*), which is bestowed

in part through speech. Such speech includes the recitation of mantras and prayers, sometimes accompanied by drums, bells, or symbols, as well as textual instruction. In addition, initiatory speech includes both advisory and direct speech. Again, no oral genre in Tibet is completely independent of the others.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SUBJECTIVITY

The structure of Tsong-kha-pa's *Illumination* is that of the *lam rim* or Stages of the Path genre that he helped make famous. Taking its inspiration in part from Candrakīrti's *Entrance*, *lam rim* literature attempts to organize numerous topics and styles of Buddhist practice into a meaningful trajectory, a step-by-step movement from the ordinary to the enlightened state. However, unlike his own and other *lam rim* texts, this one begins with the Bodhisattva's initial direct realization of emptiness.

The first direct cognition of emptiness is one of the great transitions of the Buddhist path. It marks the end of one's career as an "ordinary" person and the beginning of one's life as a Superior or āryan practitioner. It marks also the move from a conventional to an ultimate Bodhisattva intention. Prior to this moment one has sought enlightenment for the sake of all but has not yet fully understood the emptiness that makes this possible. This initial direct cognition of emptiness is the first of the ten Bodhisattva grounds.

Like the first ground, all the subsequent Bodhisattva grounds are characterized by a direct cognition of emptiness. This much is clear. But since each "ground" of understanding is, like the first, a nonconceptual and complete realization of emptiness, and since therefore there is nothing "more" to be understood about emptiness, what is it exactly that distinguishes the grounds from one another? What "improves" along the path to enlightenment? Since the Bodhisattva has already directly cognized emptiness on the first ground, why is the sixth ground known as an "enhanced" perfection of wisdom? Herein lies a mystery that this book seeks to explore.

Method and wisdom are often said to be the two wings of the bird flying to Buddhahood; in the Mahāyāna the special method is compassion, and the wisdom is the understanding of emptiness. Despite the fame of these two "wings," it is neither compassion nor an understanding of emptiness that most markedly increases over the Bodhisattva grounds. What changes most dramatically is not one's understanding as such but rather *the kind of mind* that understands. As Kensur puts it, "The difference between grounds is not made in terms of their realization of emptiness; it is measured in terms of the true or final cessation of obstructions that accompanies each." With the initial insight into emptiness come increased magical powers and also the virtuous power to overcome the coarser misconceptions known as the artificial conceptions of

inherent existence (*bden 'dzin kun btags*, **satyagrāhaparikalpita*), but the more subtle and harder-to-eradicate misunderstandings are not be discarded until the higher stages. A central issue that emerges early in the wisdom chapter of Tsong-kha-pa's *Illumination* is the way that concentration, or how the mind *is*, affects insight, or what the mind *knows*.⁴⁵

The role of concentration and mental agility on the Bodhisattva path have often been overlooked in academic discussions of Buddhist path structure and categories of mind. Kensur Yeshey Tupden's expansion on Tsong-kha-pa's discussion of a type of concentration known as the uncommon absorption of cessation provides an important counter to that neglect. This uncommon absorption of cessation (*thun mong ma yin pa'i 'gog snyoms*, **asādāranirodhasamāpatti*) is what primarily distinguishes the initial direct cognition of emptiness from the sixth ground's "enhanced" perfection of wisdom.

The detailed enumerations of subtly distinguished types of minds often seem far more elaborate than personal experience can support. Few of the descriptions are experience-near. In not finding these doctrines descriptive of their own experience, Western readers are not so very different from traditional Tibetan students of this text. The architecture of the book is, therefore, primarily intellectual; it speaks to that which many monastics will learn, but few will do. Unlike in his *lam rim* texts, Tsong-kha-pa here gives no meditation instructions; this work does not touch on Tsong-kha-pa's own meditation practice. At the same time, the significance of what the text has to say can only, by the lights of this tradition, be truly understood through considerable meditation practice.

In some ways the message and the medium of Tsong-kha-pa's work, like those of many scholastic texts of the Buddhist tradition, are at odds. The *Illumination* is a highly elaborate textual scheme dedicated to describing non-conceptual insights. The elements that mediate this dissonance are fourfold: (1) the teacher who brings the words to life by way of his respect for them and his own personal example; (2) the actual contents of his explanation; (3) the traditional ritual, meditative, and social context of which the text is an integral part, and finally, (4) the emphasis on forms of subjectivity which are nonconceptual, intense, and stable. Oral expression is crucially related to all of these.

A. Kensur Yeshey Tupden's Commentary

One of the major soteriological concerns throughout Buddhist history has been to distinguish mere calming or concentration from actual special insight (*lhag mthong*, *vipaśyanā*). Kensur's discussion, as well as Tsong-kha-pa's text, addresses this issue by considering the matter of concentration in some detail, distinguishing the special forms of absorption associated with the sixth ground from other forms of mental quiescence, and describing the insight

associated with this ground and the way in which concentration facilitates its development. The subjective states of calming (*zhi gnas, śamatha*), concentration (*bsam gtan, dhyāna*), and cessation (*'gog pa, nirodha*) are central to the Geluk path, as they are to much of Buddhist soteriology. At the same time, if we wish eventually to relate Buddhist categories of mental functioning to Western ones, calming and concentration are among the most difficult to place.⁴⁶ Here we consider the status of concentration as a philosophical category of analysis, and in this light note its specific significance in Tsong-kha-pa's work and related texts.

Kensur's discussion, like Tsong-kha-pa's, is loosely organized around three reasons for calling the sixth ground "the Manifest." At this ground (1) the illusory nature of phenomena becomes manifest because (2) the Bodhisattva has on the fifth ground manifested a nonconceptual state known as an enhanced perfection of concentration with which he observed the four noble truths. Because of this fifth ground concentration, (3) the Bodhisattva is drawing near to being capable of manifesting a Buddha's perfect qualities. All these qualities emerge because of the strengthened state of concentration on the fifth ground, which makes possible the uncommon absorption of cessation's particular experience of emptiness and dependent arising on the sixth ground. This movement between the fifth and sixth grounds repeats the pattern of a calm mind providing a basis for insight that occurred in relation to the path of preparation (*sbyor lam, prayogamārga*), when a minimum level of concentration known as calm abiding (*zhi gnas, śamatha*) was required for the initial direct cognition of emptiness on the path of seeing (*darśanamārga*).

1. *Mental Calm and the First Bodhisattva Ground.* The most obvious places to explore the significance of concentration on the Bodhisattva path are the first and sixth Bodhisattva grounds, since at these junctures the importance of concentration for special insight is foregrounded in traditional Indo-Tibetan expositions. Candrakīrti's *Entrance*, Tsong-kha-pa's discussion of it in *Illumination*, and Kensur's oral commentary on this provide particularly detailed accounts of the issues involved.⁴⁷

In the early and intermediate stages of practice, one stabilizes concentration through observing a mental object. Among Gelukbas, unlike in some other Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhist traditions, calm abiding is not cultivated through focusing the eyes on an external object but by setting the mind on an internal object such as one's own breath, or on a visualized object such as the image of a Buddha. In visualizing a Buddha, one imagines the Buddha in front of oneself. This mimics but does not replicate the subject-object distancing of sight, since a visualized object is neither quite external nor quite internal; in this sense concentration moves outside the structure of the visual. Once calm abiding is achieved, the sense that subject and object are separate is relaxed to a sig-

nificant degree; the meditator feels as if he or she could see through objects—a visual experience that has some of the unobstructed nature of sound. Calm abiding is the minimum level of concentration needed to proceed to the non-dualistic and direct experience of emptiness known as the path of seeing when subject and object appear united, “like fresh water poured into fresh water.”

In Gelukba Prāsaṅgika, an understanding of emptiness is said to result from analysis. For this reason an explanation of the compatibility between analysis and calming is considered critical. In order to make the case that conceptual analysis leads to nonconceptual experience, it becomes necessary to soften the boundaries around the functions of calming and insight. It is said that when one is properly trained, analysis *itself* induces a state of calm abiding on emptiness. This profound compatibility between calming and insight culminates in the apparent unification of these two into a single consciousness, whether as a union of calm abiding and special insight on the first ground or as the direct cognition of emptiness by the uncommon absorption of cessation (*thun mong ma yin pa'i 'gog snyoms, *asādāranirodhasamāpatti*) on the sixth ground.

The time of the initial direct cognition of emptiness, as we have noted, is called “the path of seeing”; yet this is the moment when the most salient characteristics of ordinary sight are superseded. The name “path of seeing” is almost ironic insofar as its dynamics are more suggestive of the dynamics of hearing. Direct cognition of emptiness is not, like sight in general, a sequentially ordered scanning in which objects are viewed by turn or in which subject and object are mutually distanced. All emptinesses are perceived at once, simultaneously. Emptiness suffuses experience in the all-around seamless manner of sound. Thus, the Gelukba account of the progressive stages leading to Buddhahood invokes two mental gestures which must be reconciled: opening consciousness to encompass the space-like, unconditioned emptiness, and withdrawing the mind from sense objects through cultivating various stages of concentration (*bsam gtan, dhyāna*) and absorption (*snyoms 'jug, samāpatti*). However, even when “united,” calm abiding and special insight remain functionally distinct; they are not one entity (*ngo bo gcig, ekadravya/*ekarūpatā*). Wisdom does not *become* calming, and calming does not *become* insight. Panchen Sönam Drakba himself points out that those who say these become one at the time of attaining a Bodhisattva ground are mistaken. The two mental gestures of withdrawing the mind in one sense and expanding its horizons in another are entwined, not blended. Moreover, at this advanced stage of practice, *both* the calming and wisdom functions can be characterized by both gestures. Calming takes one into oneself, and yet developed concentration leaves one with a sense of mental expansiveness. Wisdom, as the direct cognition of emptiness on the Bodhisattva grounds, withdraws the mind from conventional appearances and at the same time engages one in knowledge of the nature of all phenomena everywhere. Moreover, the oral tradition offers a delicate *caveat*

here: whereas, in earlier stages of the path, analytical and stabilizing meditation are different, they later become as if one entity insofar as they neither manifest different functions nor require different forms of effort.⁴⁸

On the first Bodhisattva ground, which is also the path of seeing, the wisdom realizing emptiness (*stong nyid rtogs pa'i shes rab*) is united with calm abiding, and no conceptual or other perceptual errors are operative. It might seem that any tensions between concentration and insight are resolved by this point on the path. To a certain extent they are. However, the nature of their relationship again becomes an issue on the sixth ground, where a further integration of calming and wisdom is required. At this time one gains an enhanced perfection of wisdom that makes possible a new type of mental focus known as the uncommon absorption of cessation, a category unique to Prāsaṅgika, and probably to Gelukba Prāsaṅgika. Whereas on the first ground one newly interfused the state of calm abiding with a direct experience of emptiness, on the sixth ground one newly unifies the uncommon absorption of cessation with that experience. The movement from the fifth to the sixth Bodhisattva ground is said to occur in a single extensive meditation session which can last as long as seven days. During this time, one attains the uncommon absorption of cessation through the power of this enhanced concentration.

The sixth-ground Bodhisattva's perfection of wisdom is an enhanced form of the nonconceptual, nondualistic experience of emptiness of the first ground. Candrakīrti uses the term "cessation" to express the attainment unique to the sixth ground; Tsong-kha-pa glosses this as an "uncommon absorption of cessation," a term he uses only at the beginning of his three-hundred-page discussion of the sixth ground.⁴⁹ Virtually the only significant sources for the topic of an uncommon absorption of cessation come from monastic texts centered on Candrakīrti's *Entrance* or Tsong-kha-pa's discussion of it.⁵⁰ Tibetan works on the grounds and paths (*sa lam*, **bhūmimārga*), tenets (*grub mtha'*, *siddhānta*) and in the *Collected Topics* genre (*bsdus grva*) do not discuss this category. The uncommon absorption of cessation, a rubric that apparently gained attention after Tsong-kha-pa's day,⁵¹ is thus a category to which only a limited, albeit important, group of texts calls attention. Kensur Yeshey Tupden's discussion of it here is probably the most elaborate in print in any language.

Tsong-kha-pa explains that on the fifth ground the Bodhisattva's concentration, no longer impeded by distraction and other faults incompatible with the perfection of concentration, becomes surpassing. This surpassing concentration enhances the wisdom which facilitates the uncommon absorption of cessation. The category of the uncommon absorption of cessation appears to exist at least in part as a way of exploring how wisdom simultaneously (1) unites with its object, and (2) knows that object, as well as (3) what kind of

“improvement” occurs in between the first and sixth grounds. It is not a question of having a better conceptual understanding of emptiness, because one has already experienced it directly. The developmental trajectory here occurs without the benefit of conceptualized “differences”—that is, without the apohic, exclusionary process by which terms and thoughts operate. There is no indication that the referent conceptual image of emptiness “improves.” Improvement is nonetheless possible because concentration improves or develops irrespective of thought-imagery.

The “surpassing, fully developed perfection of wisdom” begins at the sixth ground. At this time, one “sees emptiness to be like a reflection in the sense that it exists but is not truly established.”⁵² It is a dependent arising in the sense that the emptiness of a table, for example, depends on the emptinesses of the parts of the table. However, emptiness itself is “unconditioned” because it does not change from moment to moment in dependence on causal conditions, and thus does not exhibit the most telling symptoms of conditionality: production, aging, and destruction. This means that, although it does not depend on causality, emptiness is not independent in general, nor is the “inexpressible” mind that cognizes it. Inexpressibility here has to do with a new relationship between subject and object, and between certain of the subject’s cognizing functions, such as the full complementarity between concentration and insight. It has also to do with the ascendance of concentration, a mental state even less moored in language than the “inexpressible” wisdom it makes possible.

The uncommon absorption of cessation on the sixth and higher grounds has as its mental basis the highest form of concentration within cyclic existence. Thus, the calming side of the insight/calming equation is considerably more developed than at the initial union of calm abiding and direct experience of emptiness on the first ground.⁵³ Both calm abiding and absorption have emptiness as their object, but because their relationship to that object is different from that of most other subject-object relationships, the object is important as a support (*rten, āśraya*) rather than as an observed object (*dmigs pa, ālam-bana*). Thus, unlike in ordinary sensory and mental perception, the object 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 wisdom consciousness can exist only when conjoined with such a calmed mind.

Progress from the sixth through the tenth grounds is very much a function of the mind’s increased facility due to its further independence from thought-images. The increased mental agility which characterizes the seventh ground comes about through a cultivated dexterity that now allows one to move in and out of direct realization of emptiness very quickly—not because one has grasped some clearer understanding of emptiness but because one has acquired a more direct route to the nonconceptual mind itself. One no longer needs to be

prompted by a concept or image of emptiness on the way to a direct cognition of it—that is, for the first time one no longer needs to enter direct cognition of emptiness by way of a mental image of emptiness. Thus one is able to enter into and arise from meditative equipoise (*mnyam bzhag, samāhita*) on emptiness far more swiftly than on the sixth ground. This skillful means (*thabs, upāya*), the special perfection of the seventh ground, is a subcategory of the sixth ground's perfection of wisdom. It consists of “a wisdom of meditative equipoise induced by the surpassing method and wisdom which are of the entity of the uncommon absorption of cessation.”⁵⁴ Thus, over and over again on the path described by Tsong-kha-pa and his commentators, the power of what we might call a language-associated faculty—namely, insight—is increased through the development of a faculty not associated with language at all—namely, mental calming and concentration. To put this another way, calming, though it forms part of a cognitive process, is not itself altered by “ideas.” The factors that make a difference in relation to concentration—one's own training, immediate surroundings, physical well-being, and so forth—are not necessarily conceptual. The deeper levels of mental stabilization affect how the mind relates to its own understanding, rather than what it understands. Let us look at this claim more closely.

2. *Mental Calm and the Sixth Bodhisattva Ground.* A crucial epistemological issue here is the extent to which consciousness can become distanced from usual modes of sensory, conceptual, and other culturally or conceptually specific input and still function as consciousness in some meaningful way. In the *Entrance*, Candrakīrti writes (VI.1d): “By dwelling in wisdom [the Bodhisattva] attains⁵⁵ cessation.” His own commentary elaborates:

Because on the fifth ground the Bodhisattva attained the completely pure perfection of concentration, on the sixth ground the Bodhisattva dwells in a mind of meditative equipoise and sees the nature of the profound dependent arising; due to the thoroughly pure perfection of wisdom, the Bodhisattva achieves a cessation that did not occur previously.⁵⁶

Tsong-kha-pa develops this briefly:

Because [the Bodhisattva] attained the thoroughly pure perfection of concentration on the fifth ground, on the sixth ground, the Approaching or Manifest, s/he dwells in a fully developed mind of meditative equipoise. With this as a basis s/he abides on the sixth Bodhisattva ground seeing the profound suchness which is mere conditionality, or dependent arising, whereby s/he attains cessation. Prior to this, on the fifth ground and below, s/he did not attain cessation because of lacking the surpassing form of the

fully developed perfection of wisdom. One cannot attain cessation merely through the five fully developed perfections of giving and so forth.⁵⁷

Immediately following this statement, Tsong-kha-pa identifies the cessation in question as “an uncommon absorption of cessation.”⁵⁸ Commenting on this passage two centuries later, Jam-yang-shay-ba (*'jam dbyangs bzhad pa*) points to Candrakīrti’s emphasis on the sequential relationship between the sixth-ground attainment of wisdom and this form of cessation:

The Bodhisattva, seeing the suchness of profound dependent arising, attains [the uncommon absorption of] cessation through the thoroughly pure perfection of wisdom, not before, because s/he did not have the surpassing form of the perfection of wisdom.⁵⁹

As a type of meditative equipoise, the uncommon absorption of cessation is a form of the calming-and-focusing function; it is also, by definition, a wisdom consciousness.⁶⁰ For example, Panchen Sōnam Drakpa defines an uncommon absorption of cessation as “a wisdom of meditative equipoise that is directly poised equally on reality, [and] induced by the surpassing practice of the perfection of wisdom.”⁶¹ 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 own characteristics of clarity and knowing.

Kensur is careful to distinguish between common and uncommon absorptions of cessation. He observes that coarse mental exertion ceases from the time of first Bodhisattva ground, when it yields to an experience of the *common* absorption of cessation. This cessation however does not realize emptiness of inherent existence, whereas the uncommon absorption of cessation does. The uncommon absorption of cessation, first occurring on the sixth ground, is a highly developed form of meditative equipoise. Only Prāsaṅgika asserts it, because only Prāsaṅgika discusses the lack of inherent existence which is said to be the object of this cessation. Although Bodhisattvas do not have an uncommon absorption of cessation until the sixth ground, they do have meditative equipoise. A true cessation of the artificial conception of inherent existence is achieved on the first ground; an uncommon absorption of cessation, on the sixth. This is one of the critical differences between the two types of wisdom. Again, this has more to do with the type of mind involved than with what that mind knows.

The uncommon absorption of cessation associated with the sixth ground’s “surpassing wisdom” is to be distinguished from the cessation of discrimination

and feeling (*'dus shes dang tshor ba 'gog pa, samjñāvedyitanirodha*) described by Buddhaghosa in the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, wherein nothing mental endures. Nor is this the cessation described by Vasubandhu in the *Treasury of Knowledge (chos mngon pa 'i mdzod, abhidharmakośa)* as neither mind nor form. In contrast to both of these, the absorption of cessation is a consciousness.⁶² It is, moreover, a consciousness no longer governed by the linear, and subject-distancing, characteristics of the visual senses.

The uncommon absorption of cessation is a rubric that further interfuses the functions of calm abiding and special insight which first combined on the path of preparation (*sbyor lam, prayogamārga*). To call the union of these “special insight” (*lhag mthong, vipaśyanā*) is to assimilate the function of calming to insight; by contrast, on the sixth ground, the name “meditative equipoise” assimilates, or even masks, the function of wisdom.

Just as the path of seeing (*mthong lam, darśanamārga*) is only possible when calm abiding has been accomplished, the sixth ground’s perfection of wisdom becomes possible only upon completing the surpassing concentration on the fifth ground. The perfection of wisdom in turn, makes possible the uncommon absorption of cessation: one cannot gain such a cessation merely through the five perfections of giving, and so forth.⁶³ Calm abiding, the surpassing concentration of the fifth ground, and the uncommon absorption of the sixth ground, each provide an increased level of concentration that frees the mind from its dependence on an object. As concentration and insight develop, the subject becomes increasingly free from a differentiation between itself and the emptiness that is its special object.

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 between “sight,” and “hearing,” “oral,” and “written.” The point is that the interplay of oral and visual, of concentration and insight, is complex. This complexity is the focus of our next section.

III. 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.

—Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*

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 in which Tsong-kha-pa's text is positioned. We take as our focus the First Panchen Lama's *Path of Well-Being for those Traveling 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 to simply as the *Path of Well-Being (bde lam)*.⁶⁴ This is an early seventeenth-century meditational text based on traditional Gelukba *lam rim* teachings which coalesce recitation, visualization, physical gesture, and the nonverbal interiority of concentration. All these functions can be incorporated into a Tibetan concept of "reading" because all are directly related to 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, which, once they become habit, recede to the background. For a Tibetan engaged with such a 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 or her, even though such activity might indeed occupy one for time. Insofar as one approaches this text 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 at present, 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*),⁶⁵ mentioned 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 during recitation. Instructions of experience have a particular structure.⁶⁶ 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 through 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 First Panchen Lama's work 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. In addition to recitation of the text and reflection on its meaning, these will involve periods of visualization and concentration. Knowledge of the words will not suffice; one must know the melody and rhythm with which to chant them, 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* texts and the *Illumination*. Like these and other texts 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, and 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 topics⁶⁷ is presented in 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 vocal-

ization 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 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, which 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 the text—appear in the form of Śākyamuni Buddha. Here the meditator must call upon visual texts, paintings or statues familiar since childhood and perhaps recently studied again to refresh memory of particular details. Śākyamuni 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 marvellous tables are their own verbal teachings in the form of volumes which [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. . . ." 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.⁶⁸ Thus, the simple words "offer the seven branches of worship along with the mandala" encompass 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 arising from one's own heart and 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 which would interfere with accomplishing the purpose of that particular session—for example, with the development of compassion, calm abiding, or special insight.⁶⁹

With minor differences, the same preparation of posture and visualization is used for all the meditation topics of this text.⁷⁰ In between the meditation 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 yoga of not sleeping and of bathing and eating.” In other words, “really” engaging the text means not only reading but incorporating such nonliterary agendas as posture, recitation, movement, and nonconceptuality. 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.

—Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

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 which are ordinarily different has its own affective power.⁷¹

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 entirety of one’s mind and body, which themselves become 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 physiologically and meditatively.

In visualization one’s most private, profound, and “interior” experiences—those of meditation—are expressed and elicited through visualized 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,⁷² though at the same time they are understood to be the effect of one’s own mind. My point is that whereas Tsongkha-pa’s *Illumination* is studied as a philosophical text, and the oral commentary associated with it is valued primarily for its explanatory value, these other forms of orality, especially the conjunction of oral performance with chanting and visualization, would be well known and would be part of what the hearer/student brings to any textual encounter.⁷³

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 both a meditator and a reader and also—given the related emphasis on posture, breath, and chanting, and 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. Like an artist who uses a trained imagination rather than a brush, with a visualized expanse as canvas, 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 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.⁷⁴ 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.

The visualized figures, male or female, Buddha or Bodhisattva, are 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.⁷⁵

The meditator and visualized image come to resemble each other more and more, finally dissolving one into the other and 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.⁷⁶ Yet all this is encompassed by traditional forms of engagement with texts—texts that may describe the subject state of concentration or form part of the basis for cultivating it.

C. 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, their 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 this typically takes 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 meditation texts are never really extractable from the oral forms that make them part of interpersonal as well as intrasubjective 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 the western 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, and engages one in social community as well.

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 which is a hallmark of contemporary literary theory. In Euro-American literary circles, this reciprocity in general means that texts are not produced only by their authors, but that a reader too is, in Roland Barthes’ phrase, “the producer of a text.”⁷⁷ This 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 a "novelty" that expresses one's new and unique interpretation is not the goal.)⁷⁸ 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 both a material and 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 faithful⁷⁹ to produce a multimedia text and 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; between lectures 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, in Barbara Johnson's phrase, "differs from itself." 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 practitioner unfolds 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 elements which 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 which contradict the overt message of the text. This difference, Barbara Johnson explains, is how a text differs from itself. Such reading makes it possible to experience the multiplicities that exist within an apparently singular text. As 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."⁸⁰ Similarly, but differently, there are "differences" that appear only through the act of performing and reperforming 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 print-oriented environment seem not to obtain here. The philosophical texts on which Yeshey Tupden comments here, and his own exposition, is 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 one with a dimension not encompassed by the textual or conceptual, and thus reinforcing one of the central premises of the text to which Kensur Yeshey Tupden’s commentary is about to introduce us, that the mind of the subject is not enhanced through words alone. Also required is the art of concentration, the only subjective dimension in which wisdom can thrive.

We turn now to Kensur’s spoken scholarship.