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On Elemental Phenomenology: Sallis and Dzogchen Buddhism

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Abstract: John Sallis' volumes on the Force of the Imagination (2000) and Logic of the Imagination (2012) constitute, in the field of contemporary Continental thought, a novel philosophical view of the elementals. Tibetan Buddhism has a more than a thousand-year old tradition of teaching about and practicing with the elements. This study is a preliminary exploration of the cross-currents of these two elemental teachings.

Keywords: Sallis, phenomenology, imagination, Buddhism, Tibetan, Dzogchen, Vajrayana, tantra, emotions, elementals, elements

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In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest amongst Continental philosophers in the topic of the elementals. Outstanding amongst contemporary efforts, in pioneering a creative approach, is John Sallis' post-deconstructive phenomenology of the elementals as developed in *Force of the Imagination* (2000) and *Logic of the Imagination* (2012). A question for a comparative moment in philosophy might then be: How might Sallis' historical repetition and creative re-articulation of the ancient Greek elementals enter into dialogue with any one of the Asian tradition that has an unbroken lineage of engaging the elements? This paper is a preliminary exploration of this line of questioning, comparing Sallis' elemental philosophy to the place of the elements in the Dzogchen teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism. Its intention is itself practical: a comparative exercise in phenomenology (one that does not collapse or efface differences in the two articulations) that points towards and contributes to a more transfigured life.

What justifies this comparison are the roots of Sallis' project and Tibetan Buddhism in the perennial philosophy as articulated by scholars like Huston Smith (1992), who highlight parallel structural components in worldview amongst the various axial age traditions and their offshoots – to wit, that both ancient Greek philosophy and Tibetan Buddhism posit a “hypernatural” dimension (to use a Sallisian term) constituted by the elements. This is not to collapse these worldviews into one another, nor shortchange their differences and void the need for dialogic exchange – it does demonstrate an overlapping starting point, even as Sallis transfigures the under-evidenced senses of the elementals in ancient Greek thought.

There are to be sure different orientations informing these projects. As one of our leading contemporary philosophers, Sallis is concerned with the ongoing activity of twisting

free of a metaphysics of presence proper to the intelligible-sensible binary opposition that binds the Western philosophical tradition. In *Force of the Imagination*, the project is to lay out the self-showing of the determinate thing and the place of the elementals therein; in *Logic of the Imagination*, this project is advanced and reconfigured through investigation of logics of the imagination and the ways the expansive of the elemental play into schematic spacings. In contrast, the Tibetan project is soteriological as the liberation of all sentient beings; working with the elements assumes importance on the path of waking up and aiding others to awaken. As we shall see, there is likewise a transformational “meta-good” (to adapt a phrase from philosopher Charles Taylor) inherent in Sallis' project; what, borrowing a term from one of his own more recent books (Sallis, 2008a), might be termed transfigurement.

Sallis and the Elementals

John Sallis (b. 1938) is widely considered the dean of Continental Philosophy in the USA and beyond (Freydberg 2012). His scholarship includes groundbreaking books on Plato and Pre-Socratic philosophy, German Idealism (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, etc. – including its American reworking in transcendental thinkers like Emerson), Nietzsche, and the entire existential and phenomenological tradition of the twentieth-century (Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, etc.). Since the publication of *Force of the Imagination* in 2000, he has been forwarding an ever more nuanced originary philosophy of his own, one too little known outside of professional philosophy circles, moving through with great nuance and care both the gifts and limits of deconstruction in coming out the other side (hence “post-deconstructive” in a most sophisticated and clear-sighted manner, one potentially instructive to many of the debates in Consciousness

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Studies), this output inclusive of two recent books on the nature of nature (Sallis, 2016a and 2016b). Part of his project all along has been exemplary theoretical and philosophical-critical engagements with art and (as all too rare for philosophers) with specific works of art (Wirth, Schwartz, and Jones, 2016), including curating art exhibitions of Paul Klee and also of contemporary Chinese painter Cao Jun.

In his mature philosophy, Sallis exercises philosophy at the limit, philosophy on the verge of overcoming its own metaphysical legacy of the sensible-intelligible binary and the unmediated presence of the intelligible within that scheme - where the intelligible is paradigmatic for or productively generative and grounding of the sensible, such that the force and significance of the sensible is evacuated and neutered (Sallis, 2008b and 2016b). Even as one can never step out of the philosophical tradition, which has always already begun, one can enact another beginning. In part this other beginning is to be disclosed from the margins of the tradition, the unread of major philosophical texts, what Sallis earlier called “archaic reflection” (1980, 9-13). Rather than an endless performance of destruction/ deconstruction, Sallis enacts a twisting free within the wake of metaphysics such that we can speak of his philosophy as an exemplary instance of “post-metaphysical” thought -- even as this activating of another beginning is never complete, tradition always already under way, the renewal of philosophy always at the limit, on the verge.

Sallis’ first sustained and extensive book-length effort at forwarding a “post-metaphysical” project is *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (2000). The study is a rigorous and eloquence re-envisioning of phenomenology. The sensible is no longer mere appearance, echo, or transparent (hence inessential) medium for the shining through of

the intelligible; nor is it, in a simple reversal, that which replaces the intelligible in priority. The sensible is cast in a field of sense that twists free of the sensible-intelligible binary in allowing the very terms of the intelligible to fall away.

How then might things as partaking of the sensible make any kind of determinate sense?

Things show themselves, but never alone, always within a field of emergence, and never exhaustively, always with the sense of an abysmal reserve. In momentary glimpses, without formal-methodological enactment, the thingness of the thing can become suspended in light of the sensible image—the image *per se*. Image (as Sallis’ analyses stress sight) is not a quasi-thing but the upsurge of presence, having a locus or hereness that is prior to definitive time and space. The image is also duplicitous, belonging at once to the perceiver and to the perceived, in-different to both; taking on determination as a thing that shows itself only with the opening of speech, the presence of the image exceeded through the gathering force of logos (and at no point needing to make appeal to an *eidos* as proper to the classical metaphysical scheme). As the opening of speech exceeds the presence of the image, the image resists being carried over into something said, an untranslatability of the sense of the sensible.

The determinate thing as such is always disclosed within and against less determinate horizons. Sallis marks three such horizons: lateral, peripheral, and operational (he sometimes seems to include the operational in the peripheral). The lateral horizon, as here there are echoes of Husserl, is the unlimited store of profiles of the thing. The peripheral horizons are the visible surround and background to the focal thing. And the operational horizon,

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in its instrumental moment, is the network of equipment in line with the analysis in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. All three horizons, along with speech and the in-different image, are constitutive moments of the thing's self-showing.

Now, the imagination, marginalized in much of the metaphysical tradition, has a central place in this re-visioning. It draws these horizons around the focal thing, a movement of protraction and retention—a hovering—allowing the thing as determinate to be stretched on the edges of the indeterminate. The force of the imagination is neither productive nor reproductive but tractive. It belongs neither to a soul nor to a subject but is pure gift drafting the configuration of the self-showing of the thing itself. The disclosure of the truth of what is, the revealing and concealing of things, is made possible only through this force of the imagination.

Beyond the peripheral horizons lie another constitutive factor of the thing's self-showing: the elementals. The elementals – as here there is a contemporary philosophical re-articulation of ancient Greek thought – are the from which of manifestation, encompassing horizons and things as an unfathomable medium that in exceeding the things of nature, also belongs to nature as hyper-natural. The elementals, unlike things, have no profiles; they do not reveal themselves the way things do, drawn as they are around the various horizons by the tractive imagination. All elementals lead back to two that are primary: earth and sky. Earth shelters, supports, and withdraws, a self-closing that resists disclosure. Sky opens as an absolute recession that grants expanse, a pure shining that enables light as condition of the visible. Elementals and things intersect, overlap, and envelope one another in any number of manners.

The in-different sensible image, the opening of speech exceeding presence, the lateral, peripheral, and operational horizons, and the primary elementals of earth and sky, all as configured by the force of the tractive imagination, are constitutive moments of the self-showing of the determinate thing hovering within and against an indeterminate field.

The philosophical trajectory opened in *Force of the Imagination* is continued and deepened in the subsequent study *Logic of the Imagination: The Expanse of the Elementals* (2012), which along with the two more recent volumes on nature is among Sallis' finest and most important book to date (and one of the most innovative and clear-sighted philosophical volumes in recent memory in the Continental currents of thought). The volume starts out with a careful and illuminative historical-philosophical interrogation of the terms of logic: from various senses of Greek *logos* to modern symbolic formalizations to the exorbitant logics of dreams. This results in advancing the philosophical tradition from a logic of the understanding to a logic of the imagination and its schemata; inclusive of formal logics that adhere to the principle of non-contradiction and exorbitant logics that do not. This reframing of the scope and terms of logic deepens the prior volume's articulation of the self-showing of the determinate thing. More stress is placed on the notion of the look, characterized as a crystallization and intensification of self-showing which gathers and concentrates the thing's dynamic determination.

In its drawing together and holding apart the constitutive moments of self-showing, imagination deploys schemata that are the spacing of things – spacing itself as the ontological event-ing of the space-time of beings (schemata in their specificity inseparable from manifestation, hence neither empty containers nor mere formal dimensions as in Kant).

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There are three kinds of schemata: (1) those comprehensive of manifestation (the type that philosophy addresses); (2) those that are more local or restrictive; and (3) those proper to fantasy and the sensible. Schemata, unlike in the Kantian view, become unhinged from submersion in any kind of transcendental subjectivity, imagination characterized even more strongly than in the first volume as non-subjective; a condition of any modality of what might be termed “subject.” Imagination and its schemata are like pure gift, evoking a gratitude that is directed to no one.

Elemental attunement is transfiguring. Sallis invites us to allow the natural elementals to be absorbed by the senses, enabling the natural elementals of our constitution to be disclosed, thereby recasting the sense of human finitude. Sallis interrogates the senses of the infinite that demarcate the terms of the finite, demonstrating the care that is needed in moving from mathematical infinity to philosophical infinity; the latter always to be referenced to self-showing (in what might be mobilized as a silent critique or questioning of Alain Badiou, major contemporary French philosopher, famous for advancing with rigor the thesis that mathematics, such as set theory, is a determinate condition necessary for proper philosophical articulations of ontology). Human finitude (since Kant a theme streaming through modern and postmodern Continental thought) is centered in the proper: one’s ownmostness. Sallis explores four proper elementals: the (1) natural elements, (2) seclusion as sheltering retreat, (3) birth, and (4) death. The natural elementals indefinitely exceed the human while, disclosed through absorption in our senses, recoiling back as constitutive. (The schema of this recoiling is complex, Sallis forwarding throughout the latter chapters of the study a novel set of figurative metaphors, inclusive of circles, squares, spirals, ellipses, and fractals, serving to illustrate the imagination’s with/drawings.)

Seclusion is a depth that exceeds presence without being a subjective interiority (these singular accounts reminiscent of the empty fecundity of “causal voidness” discovered through Buddhist and Vedantic practices). Birth and death are characterized with regard to corporeity, the latter as lived capacities; life stretching out between these two extremes, neither of which are present but as encompassing elementals bestow and delimit one’s ownmost possibilities of existence. The interplay of these four elementals of the properly human is complex - more so than is directly said in this volume – leaping beyond Heidegger’s own act of overcoming subjectivism as found in the latter’s classic articulations of Dasein. Along with the natural and the proper elementals there is a third kind, that of an elemental cosmology. The final chapter of the study traces the shift from a Ptolemaic vision of a finite universe to the boundless modern cosmos: “With the passing of the sky over into the multigalactic cosmos, elementarity does not disappear; on the contrary, it is in many ways enhanced. The cosmos is encompassing ... in a way that almost exceeds comparison with the encompassing character of the natural elements, even of earth and sky” (Sallis, 2012, p. 256). Philosophy’s wondrous engagement with nature is re-awakened, immanent vision expanded by technologies that disclose a vastness of the heavens never dreamed of in the ancient world; imagination able to travel throughout the cosmos and its expansiveness. Along with the natural and the proper elementals there is a third kind, that of an elemental cosmology. The final chapter of the study traces the shift from a Ptolemaic vision of a finite universe to the boundless modern cosmos: “With the passing of the sky over into the multigalactic cosmos, elementarity does not disappear; on the contrary, it is in many ways enhanced. The cosmos is encompassing ... in a way that almost exceeds comparison with the encompassing character of the natural elements, even of earth and sky”

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(Sallis, 2012, p. 256). Philosophy's wondrous engagement with nature is re-awakened, immanent vision expanded by technologies that disclose a vastness of the heavens never dreamed of in the ancient world; imagination able to travel throughout the cosmos and its expansiveness.

Dzogchen Buddhism and the Elements

John Sallis' "turn to the elements takes up – ventures to recover – latent possibilities in the early history, the Presocratic history, of Western philosophy, possibilities that to a significant extent remained undeveloped in the course of Greek philosophy" (Sallis, 2012, p. 147). A perennial tradition that has developed senses of and practices with the elements is Tibetan Buddhism. What might Sallis' post-perennial philosophy and a ramified perennial wisdom tradition have to do with one another?

Tibetan Buddhism has a number of lineages within it, each organizing slightly differently a stratification of teachings. In the Nyingma school, Dzogchen is the pinnacle and culminating teaching of a nine-step practice path. Vajrayana, as the tantric teachings proper to Tibetan Buddhism, is sometimes referred to as a prior phase that precedes the Dzogchen teachings; while at other times it is a term used as inclusive of Dzogchen. With the latter, the tantric practices of Vajrayana are reset within a Dzogchen view and enactment. What matters for us is less these kinds of categorical designations with their nuances of practice distinctions and rather the general status of the elements.

We shall be drawing upon authentic lineage writings in English: from the late Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a famous Tibetan born lama who taught many Westerners, while also having trained many of the leading Tibetan teachers of his day (Rinpoche, 1999 and 2000); as

well as the writings of Ngakpa Chögyam and Khandro Déchen, Welsh born lineage holders, authors of several beautiful texts (e.g., 1997). This allows us to draw upon fresh writings on the one hand, and on the other to rely on authentic texts already translated into or originally written in English for contemporary teaching and practice purposes in the West.

The fundamental claim of Dzogchen is that non-duality, as the great natural perfection, is always already the case; that the difference between deluded and enlightened sentient beings is stable recognition of what already is so, just as it is. Due to karmic patterns (habits), sentient beings of the six transmigratory classes are obscured in their direct recognition of their own enlightened ground state. Practice is to dissolve these obscuring habits while stabilizing the recognition of rigpa - primordial awareness as inseparable from manifestation. Non-recognition engenders suffering; abiding recognition entails freedom from suffering; liberation. Full enlightenment is characterized by awakening to primordial awareness so deeply that its innate compassion to alleviate all suffering everywhere shines forth, like the sun illuminating the sky. Wisdom is awakening to always already rigpa, compassionate action its direct and deepest expression.

In the advanced phases of Dzogchen, the two core meditations are trechko and togal, both of which are energized through the devotional practice of guru yoga. At this mature phase of practice, the distinction between formal meditation sessions and everyday life begins to break down. Meditation is not oriented to achieve special states of samadhi, but rather exercise the simple and effortless recognition of the nature of Mind. This extends into post-meditation -- throughout the day (and into the night), as keyed by the pith instructions: (1) "short moments [of relaxed recognition of rigpa] many times," leaving everything (2) "as it is" (Rinpoche, 1999 and 2000).

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A common topic in Dzogchen teachings, which echoes aspects of tantric Vajrayana, is that of the five poisons -- the so-called afflictive emotions, or kleshas, of pride, anger, desire, jealousy, and dullness. These five poisons are said to be at their core the five wisdoms. The graded stages of Tibetan Buddhist teachings offer varying approaches for meeting the afflictive emotions. The most basic approach is rudimentary renunciation, a kind of denial of or refusal of acting upon a klesha. A next phase is the use of an antidote or counter measure, as in contemplating a decaying human body to counteract sexual desire for an attractive person. Then comes tantric Vajrayana, which has yogic techniques for transmuting emotional energies from contracted self-referencing affliction to wisdom-compassion potency. The culminating approach of Dzogchen is the self-liberation of the kleshas, the recognition of their inseparability from primordial awareness, hence their insubstantial and empty-spacious nature. Without attempting to change anything, the emotional charge comes to release on its own, enhancing the wisdom-compassion potency of rigpa. For all four approaches, the view is that without effectively meeting the kleshas, deep and abiding enlightenment is impossible.

What is important for our comparative inquiry is that each of the afflictive emotions is linked to one of the five elements. The Dzogchen view, in common with other Buddhism lineages, is of a reality comprised of three kayas or dimensions: the dharmakaya (no-thing, empty cognizance, primordial awareness itself); the sambhokaya (the visionary sphere proper to the five elements); and the nirmankaya (the every-day perceptible world of the waking state). The elements and their interplay are a source or condition of the everyday world, even as in ordinary perception they withdraw from direct sense. The conditioned, karmic “knots” of the elements, as they manifest the kleshas, they are principle

obscurations that block recognition of non-dual awareness. Working with the afflictive emotions, as “knotted” elemental energies, is a basic path of opening into the stable recognition of primordial wakefulness – one’s “own most” that is not one’s own.

In the brilliant *Spectrum of Ecstasy* (1997), Ngakpa Chögyam and Khandro Déchen expound that each of the elemental energies has a form and an emptiness, a dualistic and a non-dualistic, expression. Earth as form engenders the sense of solidity; while as empty of inherent existence it has the quality of insubstantiality. Water as form engenders the sense of permanence, where its empty sense is impermanence. Fire as form engenders the sense of separateness; its emptiness sense that of inseparability. Air in its form quality engenders a sense of continuity; in its empty sense that of discontinuity; and space (or sky) as form engenders a sense of definition; while its emptiness sense is undefineability. Emptiness realization of the elements is the initial but not final destination – for as the Heart Sutra sings: form is emptiness, emptiness is form – such that duality and non-duality, samsara and nirvana, in the ripening of awakening, come to be seen as not two.

In the transmuting or self-liberating of the five poisons into the five wisdoms, earth-informed pride becomes equanimity and generosity; water-informed anger becomes clarity of direct insight; fire-informed desire becomes compassionate discrimination of singularities; air-informed jealousy becomes fluid capacity for spontaneous effective action; and sky-informed dullness becomes pervasive primordial knowing: the five poisons unfolding themselves as the five wisdoms.

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Elementary Cross-Currents

Despite obvious divergences in the two projects, Sallis' elemental philosophy shares notable themes and cross-currents with Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the elements. Sallisian natural elementals are encompassing as natural and hyper-nature while lacking profiles. In Tibetan Buddhism, elements are subtle wisdom energies (sambhogakaya) that in part inform sensible nature (nirmanakaya) while ordinarily withdrawing from immediate vision. They are not said to lack profiles, however, as that kind of phenomenological analysis not part of this Buddhist teaching. Conversely, in certain forms of togal meditation, one looks low on the horizon at the sky, adopts a specific way of gazing along with any of several yogic postures, such that various colored lights dance in the sky, moving in and out of "emptiness," over time coming to manifest as visions (Olds and Olds, 2010). The colors of these lights and visions are said to be the direct seeing of the elements. It might turn out to be that Sallisian encompassing and Tibetan direct seeing are complementary: that pertaining to sensible nature, the elementals are hypernatural and encompassing while lacking profiles; while the natural elements can, with training, come into a certain manner of manifestation that might be considered as consistent with the definition of Sallisian self-showing, constituting a variant on his third type of schemata, a conjoined sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya spacing with its own distinctive schemata and logos. Further, Sallis speaks of the natural elementals as spanning in their encompassing the unmanifest and manifest, which has certain resonances with the experience of togal meditation, the movement of the lights in and out of manifestation, between no-thing dharmakaya and immediate vision.

Throughout Sallis' recent books there are scattered "pointing out instructions" for visualizations, including the amazing passages, in *Logic of the Imagination*, of how the imagination brings us to cosmological elementals and its expansive effects. In parallel, Dzogchen readily includes Vajrayana practices called "deity yoga" ("deity" a misleading translation of the Tibetan term "yidam"). One visualizes oneself as a divine being of translucent elemental light and in a like manner one's environment as a populated sacred palace (mandala). Over time, through sustained practice, these constructed "fantasies" come to enact themselves as direct expression and energies of the sambhogakaya. All arises as enchanted, in another mode of the conjoined spacing of the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya, again a variant of Sallis' third mode of schemata, non-identical to that of togal mentioned above, hence having its own kinds of logic.

There are to be sure taxonomical differences between the two projects. Sallis speaks of earth and sky as enchorial for all the other natural elements, coming to list traditional ones like fire but also expanding this list to include tempests and more. In the perennial tradition and its offshoots, the number of fundamental natural elements was often fixed, Tibetan Buddhism citing five, in clear contrast to Sallis for whom the natural elementals seem to have no predetermined delimitation. More significantly, Sallis expands with philosophical rigor the sense of the elemental beyond that of those that are natural, including the proper elementals of retreat, birth, death as well as the expanse of the cosmological. This is a major distinction between the two views.

Whatever the taxonomical differences and their ramifications, Sallis and Dzogchen point us to the natural elements as a way of attuning to our ownmost ways of being. Sallis instructs

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us to allow the elementals to be absorbed by the senses as this clarifies our propriety while calling forth uncontrived gratitude for manifestation. The authors of *Spectrum* begin each of the chapters focused on one of the elements with poetic descriptions of how that element operates in nature, inviting us to feel into it so to attune us to our own elemental constitution. For Sallis absorption in the natural elements recoils back upon our ownmostness; for the authors of *Spectrum*, it attunes us to our emotional energies in both their constricted and freed expressions. In both cases, the natural elements teach us about our “innermost” propriety.

Consideration of death is important to both projects. Sallis offers incisive meditations on birth and death as proper elementals. Death is at the center of Tibetan Buddhist training, the Tibetan Book of the Dead an instruction manual for how to prepare for death, how to die, and how to aid others who are dying. For Sallis, birth and death exceed representation and direct sense, these elementals encompassing life in bestowing and delimiting one’s ownmost possibilities. For Tibetan Buddhism, death is considered an “event” that can be directly experienced for those who have achieved varying degrees of stable recognition of awareness where much of one’s meditative practice is a training for the death “event.” In the former, death is beyond presence and experience; in the latter it is an “event” within always already beginningless *rigpa*. These differences are significant. And nevertheless, in Tibetan practice, meditation on death is said to be a mirror for living more fully, no longer fleeing, one might say, the limits of temporal existence, throwing the practitioner back upon the brevity and preciousness of this very life – all of which has some points of contact with Sallis’ remarks on death as encompassing condition, if not at an existential-philosophical level of articulation.

Proper Practice: Transfiguring Life

Give this brief and preliminary meditation on cross-currents between Sallis’ philosophy of the elementals and the place of the elements in Dzogchen Buddhism, we come to see that they both propound that engaging with the elements transforms or -- to use Sallis’ term -- transfigures human life. Continuing, Buddhism embraces the soteriological aim of freeing all sentient beings from suffering. To do so, one must awaken deeply to and as *rigpa* primordial awareness that itself as inseparable from boundless compassion. Purifying the afflictive emotions, which are the natural elements proper to the human, fuels the awakening process and enhances the skillful means of compassionate activity.

Sallis sings a song of philosophy as beginning in antiquity with the question of being and logos; his singular project advances the tradition from non-contradictory logics of the understanding to schematic logics that open into attunement to the elementals of the properly human: the recoiling back of natural elements, sheltering retreat, birth, death, and beyond the humanly proper to cosmological expanse. Coupled with the ongoing activity of twisting free of the metaphysics of the sensible and intelligible binary, we pass through Nietzsche’s lingering nostalgia for an intelligible overworld in Nietzsche’s not seeing active nihilism all the way out the other end (Sallis, 2012). Instead, through absorption in the elementals and exercising the imagination, we open to wonderment, joy, and a gratitude addressed to no one. Philosophy for Sallis, or so I want to argue, is a practice of self -- or rather, a proper practice -- that transfigures this very life (Schwartz, forthcoming). It awakes us to a radical immanence (as the setting in which any kind of transcendence can occur) – and in this way resonates with the immanence of the non-dual realization of *rigpa*.

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