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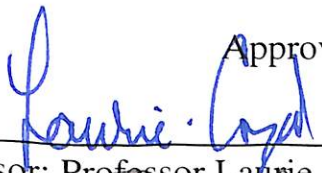
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Sound Energy as a Sacred Force

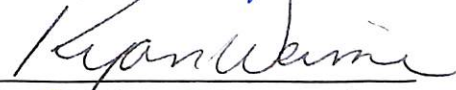
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Thomas E. Chandler, Jr.

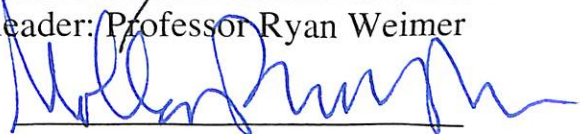
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
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Approved by

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor: Professor Laurie Cozad

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Reader: Professor Ryan Weimer

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Reader: Professor Molly Pasco-Pranger

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## ABSTRACT

### Vehicles of Tibetan Buddhism: Sound Energy as a Sacred Force (Under the direction of Laurie Cozad)

This paper focuses on a discussion of sound energy in Tibetan Buddhism and how practitioners have transformed sound into a sacred part of their religious tradition. Two specific areas have been investigated: chordal chanting practices of certain Tibetan Buddhist lamas and death rituals and how the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is used to influence a consciousness. For the section dealing with chordal chanting, most information was gained from studying secondary sources as a result of there being very little primary source material available. For the section dealing with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the text itself was investigated along with the beliefs of several practitioners who adhere to its teachings. Secondary sources were also used, although there are far more scholarly works devoted to this text than the practice of chordal chanting; therefore, this paper draws upon a select few secondary sources to show how the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* turns sound into a sacred force. At the conclusion of the research, it was discovered that Tibetan Buddhists place such a heavy emphasis on sound that it is integral to their religious practice. In conclusion, sound has become a vehicle by which a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner can gain a deeper understanding of his or her religion; in order to move beyond the physical world that is experienced on a daily basis, the practitioner must embrace sound and use it as a sacred force that is capable of advancing one on the path toward enlightenment.

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## Important Terms Defined

Bardo-“gap”, transitional stage of existence, in this paper the gap between death and rebirth

Chakras-center of spiritual energy or power in the body

Dharma-teachings of the historical Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama)

Enlightenment-higher spiritual state of awareness or consciousness attained by several different means, also an awareness that frees one from the cycle of rebirth

Karma-patterned energy, sum of a person’s actions in this life and previous lives

Nirvana-transcendent state where no suffering or sense of self occurs, sometimes a place, sometimes a state of mind, a final goal of Buddhism

Samsara-the cycle of death and rebirth

Sangha-the Buddhist community of practitioners

Terma Text- “hidden treasures”, a spiritual text hidden and meant to be discovered at a later date

Terton-one who discovers a terma text

## Introduction

Sound, and more specifically music, has been an important part of many religious traditions all over the world, such as hymns used in Christianity and the *adhan*, or call to prayer, in Islam. Indeed, sound itself has sometimes come to symbolize a religious tradition. The hymn *Amazing Grace* is definitively Christian, and the recitation of the *bismallah* is directly equated with Islam. Buddhism, too, has distinctive sounds that distinguish it from other religious traditions not only in Asia but also the rest of the world. Ian Mabbett states, “There is scarcely any religious denomination on the face of the earth in whose sacred ceremonies music holds a more prominent place than Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether or not one agrees with this point, this paper will show how Tibetan Buddhists have manipulated sound in such a way that it has become an important, even central, aspect of their religious practice. One of the important ways in which Tibetan Buddhists use sound energy and music is through chordal chanting. This practice involves a Buddhist monk possessing the ability to chant an entire chord alone through a refined method taught only to a select few monks in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhists also focus much attention on using the power of sound to influence the consciousness of the deceased. Sound is indeed a central aspect in the practices surrounding death in the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. This paper will examine the practice of chordal chanting and the uses of sound in Buddhist death rituals, providing the history behind these rituals and their functions and roles within Tibetan Buddhism; the paper will also argue that the Tibetans have made sound, and more specifically chordal chanting and the sounds associated with death rituals, into a sacred and invaluable aspect

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<sup>1</sup> Ian W. Mabbett, “Buddhism and Music,” *Asian Music* 25, no. 1/2 (1993-94): 9.

of their religious tradition that can greatly aid the Buddhist practitioner on the path toward enlightenment.

There has been extensive research into the history of Buddhism. Scholars, such as Andrew Skilton and Theodore de Bary, have examined and explained the foundations of the religious tradition, the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, the various schools of thought, the schisms between those schools, and Buddhism's impact on the world throughout history. They have not, however, adequately discussed many of the rituals that are so essential for understanding the essence of Buddhism and how practitioners use the religion to explain their place and purpose in the world. More specifically, scholars have not adequately examined music within Tibetan Buddhism and how it functions within the larger context of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason for this is that "one cannot understand Tibetan Buddhism thoroughly without having the direct experience of living in a Tibetan monastery."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many scholars, myself included, must exist as 'armchair researchers,' mostly because they do not have the means to travel halfway around the world in order to study the religious tradition in person. As a result of this complication, the scholarship of a select few individuals must be drawn upon in order to compile research on the subject. This paper exists as a compendium of knowledge concerning sound in Tibetan Buddhism, and it is perhaps the first of its kind.

Jonathan Goldman has probably produced the most helpful literature on Tibetan Buddhist chordal chanting in his book *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics*. He focuses on the uses of chordal chanting in healing, but he also includes many teachings

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Gard, ed., *Buddhism* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 1961), 196.



about the ritual in his book. Goldman learned these facts from a group of Tibetans with whom he lived for a short period of time. This unique instance of practitioners being willing to open up to a Western scholar has greatly aided in the preparation of this paper, since Goldman includes information about the functions of chordal chanting, its history and origins, and his own views about how to replicate the chord. Another scholar who gained access to a group of Tibetan Buddhists is Huston Smith, the author of an article titled "Unique Vocal Abilities of Certain Tibetan Lamas." He also provides helpful insights into the ritual, many of which are beyond the limited availability of most Western scholars. Smith also provides an analysis of the chord produced by the monks from the approach of an ethnomusicologist. Thanks to his research, analysis, and discussion with practitioners, scholars now have information about the possible makeup of the chord. Although not necessarily relevant to the major aspects of the religious ritual, this information is interesting to anyone studying chordal chanting.

The other scholars who proved invaluable to the research on chordal chanting were Carol Pegg, who authored "Mongolian Conceptualizations of Overtone Singing," and Peter Vähi, the author of "Buddhist Music of Mongolia." Both of these scholars focused on the origins of chordal chanting within Tibet and linked it to a form of chanting found in Mongolia. Pegg focuses on *hoomi* singing and its relationship to Tibetan chordal chanting, and she emphasizes her belief that Tibetans refined the chanting style and added an element of sacredness that further separated it from its Mongolian counterpart. Vähi also discusses the various musical instruments used during many chordal chanting ceremonies and how they affect the ritual.

Regarding the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the primary text itself is naturally a significant part of the scholarship. It was more difficult deciding which scholars to use for reliable information, however, since the text itself is accessible to anyone. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is valuable, but it does not necessarily deal with the issue of how sound is used as a sacred part of the religious tradition. In fact, were it not for the preface and introduction included in Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa's translation of the text, scholars might not realize how important the text is within the Tibetan Buddhist death ritual; now, Westerners can understand how important it is to hear the text recited at the moment of death. If it were left to these Western scholars to discern the text's true importance and contribution to Tibetan Buddhism, then they might be as much in the dark as most are with regards to the tradition of chordal chanting.

In order to fully grasp the extent of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead's* importance, one must understand the emphasis that the Tibetan people place on death. Most of the scholars cited in this paper recognize this emphasis, and they argue that this concern with the eventual end of a person's life gave rise to the creation of the text. One of these, Maurice Cohen, even titled his essay on the subject, "Dying as Supreme Opportunity." The reason for this title is because death is seen as a time when a person's consciousness has the ability to instantly gain liberation from rebirth. Donald Lopez, in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, discusses how Tibetan Buddhists prepare for death as an important step toward gaining liberation. Another important source was Jeffrey Hopkins' book, *The Buddhism of Tibet: His Holiness the Dalai Lama*, because it presents the spiritual leader of Tibet and his teachings on death and how practitioners prepare for its occurrence. Other works, such as Francesca Fremantle's *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the*

*Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Glenn Mullin's *Living in the Face of Death: The Tibetan Tradition* proved invaluable to this paper because of their discussions on how the text affects the consciousness of practitioners and how one prepares to use the teachings after death.

Émile Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”<sup>4</sup> Although the *Sangha*, the community of practitioners of Buddhism, does not fit what many Western scholars would constitute as a church, the practice of choral chanting has been set apart as something sacred mainly by its lack of accessibility to the ordinary practitioner. Goldman states, “Despite my best efforts, the monks would not divulge information about their chanting techniques [because] I had not been initiated into their teachings.”<sup>5</sup> Chanting in this style is a highly refined form of religious expression only available to select adherents of Tibetan Buddhism. Many of the practices associated with this chanting style have been passed down orally from a single teacher to a single student. Thus, no written records exist; there are no transcripts, at least not any that have been translated into a Western language, that discuss the history of this practice, how to perform it, or its meaning, importance, and place within Tibetan Buddhism. This method of transmission, one that is narrow and very selective, has isolated the practices of Tibetan Buddhists from outsiders, even from Buddhists of other sects within this specific religious tradition. The rituals surrounding death have been written down,

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<sup>4</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Goldman, *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics* (Rochester, Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 2002), 71.

however, and scholars are able to read the exact teachings concerning the role of sound in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The only catch with this text is that many of the images and descriptions that it lists are not easily understood to those who are not trained in its teachings, which usually includes the scholars who write about the subject. The means by which scholars have interpreted the text will be discussed in a later section of the paper.

This lacunae in the literature requires scholars to attempt to communicate with the practitioners directly, an act that has, until very recently, proved impossible because of an unwillingness of many Tibetan Buddhists to share the tenets of their religion with non-practitioners, especially Westerners.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, there are some scholars from Tibet who study their own culture as a way of preserving and promoting it. This does not necessarily help Western scholarship in its analysis of Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions, however, because Tibetan scholars often neglect to focus on the details in which their Western counterparts are most interested.<sup>7</sup>

Ever since the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, many of the monks who fled Tibet for refuge in India have been more willing to discuss their practices with Western scholars.<sup>8</sup> These Buddhists are beginning to open up their religion to Western scholars, but the literature is still lacking, especially on the subject of sound and its function within Tibetan Buddhism. Huston Smith was not able to directly interview monks living in Tibet when he was conducting research in 1964 because of his United States citizenship.

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<sup>6</sup> Huston Smith, "Unique Vocal Abilities of Certain Tibetan Lamas," *American Anthropologist* 69, no. 2 (1967): 209.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Wu, "Music Scholarship, West and East: Tibetan Music as a Case Study," *Asian Music* 29, no. 2 (1998): 38.

<sup>8</sup> Goldman, 66.

chanting].”<sup>12</sup> Even though the Tibetan monks are able to employ chanting techniques that seem outside the realm of possibility, this breaching of the normal and acceptable barriers of experienced reality lies at the core of their efforts toward liberation. The sounds that are produced through chanting are necessary in “destroying discursive consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> This means that the sound itself helps the mind to focus on the goal of liberation instead of moving from thought to thought in a mentality of distraction. By focusing on a distinct and specific sound, the mind is no longer hampered by the normal thought processes that divide a person’s awareness between too many subjects.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 96.

## Chapter 1: Methodology

In short, a scholar's methodology consists of the means by which he or she approaches the object of analysis as well as the tools necessary for observation and examination. For the topic of sound within Tibetan Buddhism that is covered in this paper, there is a unique and somewhat difficult methodology that must be employed. First of all, it is important to note that there has been limited accessibility to Western scholars concerning the true scope of meaning behind many of the Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Although scholars have devoted their study to this interesting religious tradition, there simply have not been many practitioners who have been willing to divulge the secrets involved in their rituals. Thus, there are still certain aspects of Tibetan Buddhism that are essentially closed to conventional scholarship. Without the aid of a practitioner, scholars can only produce a limited account of what it means to fully engage in the rituals of this religious tradition.

With the topic of chordal chanting, the object of analysis is held apart from not only the scholar but also many practitioners of the religion itself. Within the framework of Durkheim's definition of religion, chordal chanting becomes a sacred ritual that is only accessible to a select few monks who are willing to undergo years of training and practice in order to achieve mastery and perfection. For them, the practice has implications for greater spiritual awareness and a desire to achieve enlightenment. As a result, specific practitioners must be observed and interviewed in order to expand the literature on chordal chanting, but the masters of the practice have mostly been unwilling to open up their ritual to Western scholars.

Another problem in the study of Tibetan chordal chanting is that there is no primary literature available to the scholar. As practitioners have made it a point to keep the practice, its purpose, its history, and perhaps most importantly its specifications and instructions a secret from the uninitiated, the ritual has also been passed down orally from teacher to student ever since its origin; therefore, no one is going to uncover a hidden manual sometime in the future that completely lays out the beliefs surrounding chordal chanting. Thus, the scholar must approach this topic strictly through secondary sources and the scholarship of others. Every piece of information found about chordal chanting must be considered valuable even if it does not end up in the paper because the resources are so limited. The strength of this methodology is that the information is not tainted by the biases of practitioners, but this also results in its largest weakness, the absence of the voice of those who practice the religion. One must also always be aware of the subjective biases of secondary sources since scholars each have their own agenda when writing an academic paper or book.

Since chordal chanting has been set apart and the practitioners have been unwilling to open up to the non-Buddhist world, it has been effectively closed to outside scholarship. Thus, scholars must exist as participant observers. This means that one must first gain entrance to a Tibetan Buddhist community and then be allowed to study and observe the ritual from a distance with only limited access to practitioners. There is also an element of suspicion present when dealing with practitioners who have never opened up their religious tradition to scholarship before. In order to gain more information from practitioners, it is up to the scholar to dispel this element of suspicion or fear and convince everyone that he or she can be trusted. The scholar has to watch the

ritual and make educated guesses in order to further his or her scholarship. This obviously has its drawbacks, since this will often result in too many assumptions on the part of the scholar, and the literature will contain more of a personal bias if practitioners do not substantiate the ideas themselves. Karen McCarthy Brown, a scholar who studied Haitian voodoo from within the community as a participant observer, argues, “The people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves whenever possible, for they are the only true experts on themselves.”<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately for academia, there is no how-to guide on chordal chanting, but despite this, some scholars have made attempts to replicate the practice and create their own guide. Taking the information out of the hands of the practitioners, however, has often resulted in poor and subjective scholarship.

Luckily there have been a few instances where scholars have been allowed into these communities with the intent to write about chordal chanting. These secondary sources are essential to literature such as this paper, because they are as close as a scholar such as myself will be able to get to the ritual. Jonathan Goldman and Huston Smith are two scholars who have been able to directly interview monks and gain valuable information that adds to the literature on chordal chanting, and Goldman produced the first recordings of the practice. Unfortunately, scholarship of this caliber is few and far between. One must treat every source as something immensely valuable to the research process while still forming a solid argument. Until practitioners either decide to write about the ritual or open up to outside, non-Tibetan scholars, the literature on the subject will cease to increase enough in order to form a substantial body of information on chordal chanting.

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<sup>14</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 14.



Scholars must use an entirely different methodology when dealing with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Since the text has been translated and published across the world, the primary source itself can naturally become part of the scholarship. This is where there is a difference between studying chordal chanting and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; the ritual of chordal chanting exists within an almost entirely closed system while the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is completely open to scholarship. In essence both have the same problem, which is that the object of analysis is inaccessible. Information concerning chordal chanting is inaccessible because the practitioners have been unwilling to share about the ritual. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is somewhat inaccessible because it is so open and available to scholars that perhaps too many people have tried to approach it in their academic literature. This results in information that might not be true to the actual text since scholars might not understand its teachings as well as they might claim. The images and descriptions presented in the text are completely unfamiliar in the Western world because the text was written within the framework of the Tibetan society, so only those familiar with Tibetan Buddhism and its intricate details and teachings will be able to fully understand the text without using outside interpretations. Unfortunately some scholars have attempted to analyze the text without this extensive prior knowledge, so one must be careful when reading through the interpretations in secondary sources and be sure to choose literature that is supported by the text itself. This proliferation of unhelpful secondary sources is no doubt the weakness of this methodology, so the scholar must put extended effort into finding strong arguments that are backed by the primary text itself along with beliefs of practitioners.

Since the object of analysis in this case is completely open to the general public, there has been much more literature produced that has been drawn upon in this paper. Even though there is a heavy emphasis on the literature of other scholars through secondary sources, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* will be cited as well. The important thing in this case is sifting through the extensive amount of opinions and theories in order to find the ideas that truly reflect the purpose of the text and its place within Tibetan Buddhism. Instead of mining each source for valuable information regarding the topic, one must do away with unhelpful scholarship in order to form a cohesive idea that positively adds to the literature on the subject.

## Chapter 2: Chordal Chanting

### I. Myths & Beginnings

Rituals that are considered sacred in most religious traditions have some sort of mystical or mysterious tale or myth concerning their origins. These tales describe the early history of a tradition, practice, or ritual and place it within the context of that specific religious belief system. A myth can further validate a ritual and help practitioners understand why they perform certain actions within their religion. In the Christian tradition, the observance of the Eucharist as a sacrament is equated with the Biblical story of Jesus' aptly named 'Last Supper,' during which Jesus and his disciples partook of bread and wine. Jesus instructed the disciples to recreate this event, "in remembrance of me."<sup>15</sup> Likewise the *hajj*, the spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca that is required of all Muslims, and all of its associated ceremonies and rituals are based on both Biblical and Qur'anic stories. Chordal chanting also has a myth that establishes its place within Buddhism and gives the practice a quality of sacredness.

Of the scholars who have written on chordal chanting, Jonathan Goldman is perhaps the foremost expert. He traveled to Tibet and was able to produce what is believed to be the first ever tape recording of a group of Tibetan monks participating in a chordal chanting ceremony. In his writings, Goldman discusses several of the supposed beliefs surrounding the beginnings of chordal chanting as a religious practice while also providing some of his own observations and comments on the ritual. The premiere myth

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<sup>15</sup> Luke 22:19 (King James Version).

stems from a story about a Tibetan monk named Je Tzong Sherab Senge. In 1433 this Buddhist monk had a dream during which he witnessed two voices emanating from his own body, one that was “unbelievably deep” and one that was “high and pure.”<sup>16</sup> Once the monk awoke from the dream, he discovered that he had gained the extraordinary ability to chant with these two voices simultaneously. Thus, Je Tzong Sherab Senge began to teach other monks this new chanting technique, which in Goldman’s words served to “embody both the masculine and feminine aspects of divine energy” and “unite those chanting it in a web of universal consciousness.”<sup>17</sup> Tibetan Buddhism places strong emphasis on the relationship and importance of balance within this concept of duality. Rita Gross also mentions that Tibetan Buddhism “is unique among Buddhist traditions in the prominence it gives... to feminine symbolism,” but she goes no further to explain anything that relates to the subject at hand.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the phenomenon discovered by the monk, the Gyume and Gyuto Tantric Monasteries were founded in Lhasa, Tibet in order to teach other monks this unique chanting practice. The ritual is given validation by the promulgation of this myth; it shows the mysterious origins of this practice and further sets it apart as a sacred act by giving practitioners something tangible on which to reflect and remember.

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<sup>16</sup> Goldman, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross, *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 191.

## II. Historical Contexts

The most prominent theory about the historical beginnings of chordal chanting centers on a discussion of *hoomi* singing from Mongolia. This relationship between the Tibetan and Mongolian cultures is important to understanding the historical beginnings of chordal chanting. This is not surprising, as “there was the usual practice of Buddhism accommodating and adapting folk customs wherever it established itself in Asia,” which is commonly found within many religious traditions, such as the adaptation of ‘pagan’ symbols for use in the Christian celebration of Christmas.<sup>19</sup> Goldman discusses the ‘Kargiraa’ style of *hoomi* overtone chanting found in Mongolia. This chanting style consists of a chanter producing a low fundamental tone and then creating harmonics two to three octaves above it, just like in Tibetan chordal chanting. According to Goldman, however, the Mongols chanted “wordless melodies” while the Tibetans used sacred sounds, which is an important distinction made by the Tibetan monks as a way of further separation from outsiders, the Mongols in this case.<sup>20</sup> This separation serves to make the Tibetan chanting style into something sacred, because it was not accessible to the Mongol neighbors. Even though the two chanting styles are very similar and probably borrowed techniques from one another, the use of sacred melodies by the Tibetans naturally excludes anyone who is not initiated into the religious order and anyone who is not literate in the mystical language of the chords.

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<sup>19</sup> Gard, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Goldman, 68-9.

*Hoomi* singing, mentioned above by Goldman, is also known as *xöömii*, and it has been further discussed alongside Tibetan chordal chanting by Carol Pegg. The distinction between the two, echoing Goldman, is that Mongolian chanting is generally a purely secular activity, whereas Tibetan chanting is clearly, in Pegg's view, used as a religious rite. Pegg claims the monks of Tibetan Buddhism considered Mongolian chanting as being "without respect" for the sacred sounds that were being produced, because the Tibetans used sacred chords while the Mongols produced wordless melodies.<sup>21</sup> Even though the Mongols did not use sacred texts or chords, the sounds were still believed to possess a sacred quality. Thus, there is a feeling of superiority that the Tibetans had over their Mongol neighbors, because the Tibetans viewed their chanting style as more advanced and useful to their lifestyles. Pegg, like many other scholars, mentions the difficulty in studying these obscure practices because of the "inaccessibility of those Central Asian areas where it occurs and partly because of the orientation of the researchers."<sup>22</sup> Here Pegg is referring to the fact that the researchers are Western scholars who are not practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite this difficulty of accessibility, Pegg had the opportunity to study the *hoomi* style of overtone chanting in person when she spent time doing field research in Mongolia between 1989-90.

Peter Vähi has extensively researched the link between the Buddhist music of Tibet and the music found in Mongolia. He further reinforces the argument that Tibetans have placed an exalted level of emphasis on the use of sound to their spiritual practice.

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<sup>21</sup> Carol Pegg, "Mongolian Conceptualizations of Overtone Singing," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 1 (1992): 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Vähi goes into great detail about the specific instruments used in both cultures, because many of them are in fact the exact same or very similar to one another. The *uher-buree* is a large horn that must be supported by a wooden stand and is used to produce extremely deep bass tones. The *honh* is a small bell that is often used within chordal chanting ceremonies that “creates a high piercing sound that symbolizes ultimate transcendental wisdom.”<sup>23</sup> Percussion instruments, such as the *bombor* drum and the *tsan* and *selen* cymbals are also used to keep steady rhythms during ritual performances or to provide a type of background noise during a ceremony.

Vähi’s greater argument is that the musical styles of Tibet and Mongolia share many commonalities, and he emphasizes the trend mentioned earlier of cultures borrowing and accommodating practices from one another. In a more mystical description, Vähi describes the deep tones of the chanters as representative of the “horrible and even repugnant characteristics” of certain deities, but he does not go into any significant detail as to the belief in chanting being used to affect deities.<sup>24</sup> He is referring to a belief within Tibetan Buddhism that deities can serve as a protective force when practitioners appeal to them directly by making offerings or participating in certain rituals. Vähi argues that chordal chanting is one such avenue by which a practitioner can influence the actions of a deity.

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<sup>23</sup> Peeter Vähi, “Buddhist Music of Mongolia,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 2, no. 1 (1992): 51.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

William Weedon discussed the physical geography of Tibet and characterized it as “fearsome.”<sup>25</sup> This discussion links with the previous argument that the sounds produced by the chanters are ‘horrifying’ or ‘repugnant.’ He blames the tendency of Westerners to place these labels on the inhabitants of Tibet and some religious practices on the “wild severity of the country’s physical aspect.”<sup>26</sup> Although he lists the ‘terrible’ aspects of some of Tibet’s religious culture, he concedes that these do not present themselves within Buddhism. In spite of the “fierce and gruesome practices of the inhabitants,” Weedon argues, “Many of these scarce accord with the gentle doctrines of the Gautama.”<sup>27</sup> One must also be careful, however, when labeling features of other cultures “terrible” and “horrifying,” because the actual practitioners of the religion might view the figures or their characteristics through a completely different lens.

Janet Gyasto discusses the common practice of Westerners viewing Tibetan religious beliefs as savage and animistic. She argues that there is an “ancient conception of the country of Tibet as being filled with spirits, mostly malevolent, that needed to be appeased and controlled in a complex variety of ritual ways.”<sup>28</sup> However, she points out that this conception of Tibet is one shared by the indigenous people as well. There are certain rituals that serve to deal with these malevolent spirits, and one’s life can greatly be affected by how one does or does not interact with the spirits. If the nonhuman beings

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<sup>25</sup> William S. Weedon, “Tibetan Buddhism: A Perspective,” *Philosophy East and West* 17, no. 1/4 (Jan.-Oct. 1967): 168.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Janice D. Willis, ed., *Feminine Ground* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987), 33.



are not appeased in the correct way, a person's life could be cut short or great harm could befall that person's family. Thus, she argues that practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism are encouraged to perform the necessary rituals that will ward off these troublesome spirits, and the practice of chordal chanting might sometimes be one such ritual with apotropaic qualities.

### III. Other Possible Historical Beginnings

There were five dangers listed in the Vinaya Pitaka related to chanting in a song-like voice. The Vinaya Pitaka is part of the Pali Canon, also known as the Tripitaka, which was formed after the death of the historical Buddha, sometime around 400 BCE. The Tripitaka consists of the Sutra Pitaka, the Abhidharma Pitaka, and the Vinaya Pitaka, which "is concerned with regulating the life of Buddhist monks and nuns."<sup>29</sup> The dangers listed in the Vinaya Pitaka were: the monk can become pleased with himself, others are pleased by the sound (which draws them away from the Dharma), prominent people look down on the chanter (because he enjoys "sense-pleasures"), the chanter neglects the true meaning of the sacred texts, and the question of tradition causes strife among other practitioners (people fight over which style of chanting is based on the proper precedents).<sup>30</sup> The purpose behind these warnings was to keep the monk focused and mindful of the true meaning of the words he was chanting. Basically, chanting is

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1994), 73.

<sup>30</sup> Khantipalo, *Lay Buddhist Practice: The Shrine Room, Uposatha Day, Rains Residence*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/khantipalo/wheel206.html>

permissible, and even somewhat preferred, but it must be done carefully and with a humble mindset if one is to remain pure.

The previous section dealt with the relationship of chanting and music between Tibet and Mongolia, but this section discusses other possible origins of chordal chanting that reflect strictly spiritual beginnings. Both of these approaches have merit, and they are both helpful to answering questions about how chordal chanting began in Tibet.

Goldman argues for the following use of chordal chanting within the context of its start in Tibetan Buddhism:

The Tibetan Buddhist path to self-realization involves the understanding of the Three Mysteries. These are the Mysteries of Body, Speech, and Mind, whose experience has been condensed into the mantric formula OM-AH-HUM. Speech is the interconnector between the Mind and the Body. Speech is the understanding of sound as the creative force and incorporates the knowledge of using mantra as a sacred tool for summoning up the appearance of gods and the forces of the universe. Through the creation of several tones at the same time, the 'One Voice Chord' may be a further condensation of the Three Mysteries into an expression of Body, Speech, and Mind as pure tone.<sup>31</sup>

This means that the chanter believes in the sacredness of this specific mantric formula, and one can gain advancement toward enlightenment by chanting these syllables. The chanting acts as a bridge between the body, this world, and the mind, the source for the sacred world. The practitioner's body becomes a vehicle for the sacred sound and is capable of gaining a transcendental state.

Another widely held theory argues that Buddhists incorporated the chanting styles from the indigenous religious tradition of Tibet, the Bon. There is some debate among scholars as to the extent of the Bon influence on Tibetan Buddhism and vice versa.

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<sup>31</sup> Goldman, 70.

Hopfe and Woodward describe Bon as “a form of folk Buddhism that is more concerned with life in the world than with the attainment of enlightenment.”<sup>32</sup> The Bon tradition places emphasis on the relationship between humans, demons, and spirits that interact with the world. There is also difficulty placing a date on this religious tradition.

Whereas some scholars place the roots of the Bon to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, others argue that it has been around even longer than that. Regardless of this argument, there have indeed been interactions between the Bon tradition and Tibetan Buddhism, and there is a definite link with regard to sound energy.

In the Bon tradition, music was used to communicate with the supernatural world, and rituals were a method of invoking good spirits as a way to ward off the evil spirits. Thus, the sound of the chanting becomes apotropaic, protecting the practitioner from harm.<sup>33</sup> Goldman describes the Bon tradition as “an animistic shamanic practice” that included chanting techniques similar to those found in Mongolia. He then cites Terry Ellingson as stating that the Bon used “sound modification based upon vowel changes in sequence of meaningless syllables.”<sup>34</sup> As noted by Goldman, Padmasambhava, the spiritual leader credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century CE, instructed the Tibetan Buddhists to chant in the style used by the earlier tradition of the Bon, but he also warned the Buddhists against using meaningless vowel sounds like the

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, “Tibetan Music: Secular and Sacred,” *Asian Music* 1, no. 2 (1969): 5.

<sup>34</sup> Goldman, 69.

Bon, because this would make the words of the sacred sounds lose their purity.<sup>35</sup> If the meaning of the teaching is lost, then the sounds become useless to the practitioner and their progress on the path toward enlightenment is halted.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. The Chord

The actual makeup of the chord has also been under some debate and much scrutiny. Huston Smith states that the monks chant a D, and F#, and an A simultaneously, while Goldman cites other musicologists who argue the notes as being a C that is two octaves below middle C, a D#, and an F#.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the actual letter names of the notes, the lowest tone produced vibrates at 75.5 cycles per second (cps), which compared to a male opera singer's lowest tone, vibrating at 150 cps, is extremely slow.<sup>38</sup> This simply means that the slower the vibration of a tone, the deeper the tone that is produced. Huston Smith has also made reference to the slow rate of vibration of the fundamental tone as being 75.5 cps.<sup>39</sup> This produces a tremendously deep tone that often sounds as if the chanter is growling at the listener. Many Westerners hearing the monks perform for the first time often think the monks are singing in parts, because many of the musical forms of the East have been traditionally focused more on complex melodies and rhythms rather than harmonies and the blending of voices, but this of course is not the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Lhalungpa, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Goldman, 66-67.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 210.

case as single monks can produce chords themselves.<sup>40</sup> Smith did not argue for any specific importance concerning which notes are chanted; he merely studied them from an interest in their musicality. Goldman, however, would argue that specific notes indicate various beliefs or tenets of Tibetan Buddhism that had been encoded into the chanting.

### V. Production/Replication of the Chord

The next important aspect of chordal chanting that must be understood is the ‘how’ question. There have been several contradictory answers to this question, many of which are centered on the attempts of a Western scholar trying to replicate the sounds. Goldman provides his own ideas about how one is to produce the sounds of the monks. He attempted to produce the deep tones from within his gut, with the eventual result of strained vocal chords and frustration. It is important to note here that Pegg mentions that Tibetan chanting has been ‘Westernized’ in the sense that people, like Goldman in his book *Healing Sounds*, are now promoting chanting as a way for healing, both physical and spiritual.<sup>41</sup> The use of sound as a healing mechanism is based on the idea of *chakras*, centers of energy found in certain areas of the body. Goldman argues that one can influence these centers by chanting specific mantras that correspond with different areas. One can debate the validity of this argument, but the problem with arguing for this method of healing in a way that is open and accessible to the general public is that Goldman neglected to inform his readers of the physical dangers to someone who does

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>41</sup> Pegg, 42, 48.

not chant in the correct way, which includes severely strained vocal cords and a loss of voice.

Goldman claims he gained the ability to chant multiple notes by simply spending time with the monks and listening to the recordings he had produced. He describes the ability to chant in this way as a gift that resulted from “making an offering to the Buddha on a conch shell in a past life.”<sup>42</sup> He argues that the practice has always been transmitted in this way; students spent large amounts of time with their teachers simply listening to the chanting, and eventually they gained the ability to chant in chords themselves. Interestingly, however, he neglects to mention whether any practitioners claim that chordal chanting has the power for healing, which is the argument of his book.

This theory on transmission seems to be widely held by scholars, as Robert Thurman also argues for ‘transmission by association.’ Thurman argues, as cited by Goldman, “It is not considered possible to achieve the technique manually.”<sup>43</sup> This means that a person can force the body to produce similar sounds, but the chords will never be as distinct and pure as those produced by the monks. The person might also cause harm to the body that prevents it from ever producing the chords again. Thurman thus argues that non-practitioners cannot effectively learn the technique of chordal chanting without initiation into the Tibetan Buddhist monastic order.

Once Goldman was able to form the chords, he continued the practice by creating growl-like sounds in the back of his throat and then projecting the sound into his

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<sup>42</sup> Goldman, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 73.

diaphragm area, which resulted in the creation of the deep fundamental tone that is necessary to the entire process. Lastly, “I then tense my cheeks and purse my lips as the voice comes out of my mouth.”<sup>44</sup> The reason he includes his own thoughts on the question of ‘how’ is because the monks are very reluctant to teach their methods to those, especially scholars like Goldman, who have not been initiated into their order. There is indeed integrity in the fact that the monks continue in secrecy even after they have given up seclusion. Even though it is frustrating to scholars, like myself, who are attempting to research their practices, the monks wish to keep the innermost secrets of their chordal chanting practices hidden. This reinforces the theory, mentioned earlier, of what defines the sacredness of an object, or in this case, ritual, by the fact that it has been separated from the general body of religious practitioners and set apart as something only the ‘initiated’ or ‘elect’ can experience.

Terry Ellingson describes chordal chanting as a type of ‘inhalation breathing.’ When this method is used, the deep fundamental tones that are produced are “richer and stronger than growled ones, like those used by Goldman.”<sup>45</sup> One of the unwanted side effects of inhalation breathing during chanting, however, is that the overtones produced are not as highly refined and amount to what Ellingson calls “noise” overtones.<sup>46</sup> He then argues that the Tibetan monks have been able to refine these overtones to coincide with the fundamental tone and then create a chord. This method of breathing requires the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>45</sup> Terry Ellingson, “The Technique of Chordal Singing in the Tibetan Style,” *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 4 (1970): 827.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 828.

practitioner to inhale through the nose while simultaneously emitting the chanting sounds and chords through the mouth, thus inhaling and exhaling at the same time. This is a very complicated technique, but several scholars with a background in music, like Ellingson, have claimed to use this method to perfectly replicate the chords. Ellingson himself argues that he can use this technique to successfully replicate any of the chords produced by the monks, a feat which is very impressive.

Huston Smith has attempted to replicate the way in which the monks create such deep fundamentals and overtones. His approach was more scientific, and it dealt with an examination of the vocal cavities and vocal cords and how they interact to produce the tones. Every sound that is produced during chanting is a result of the “excitation of the vocal cavities” by a sound created by the vocal cords. Each sound created by the vocal cords “has a spectrum that is characterized by a fundamental frequency and a number of harmonics or overtones whose intensities decrease with increasing frequency.”<sup>47</sup>

Basically, all sounds produced by a person use the vocal cords, and these sounds possess corresponding overtones. Thus, the monks are able to manipulate these frequencies in such a way that the extremely deep fundamental tone is produced with the usual harmonics and overtones existing also. The problem with many non-Buddhists attempting to replicate these practices is that they have not been properly trained.

According to Ellingson, many of the Tibetan monks who chant in this style begin their studies at the age of 12, and even then they are not allowed to overwork themselves; they are required to spend a great deal of time merely listening to their teacher and learning

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, 210.



the sounds of the fundamental tone and the overtones by ear. Also, there are only two schools in Tibet, the Gyume and Gyuto Monasteries, where the chordal chanting technique is taught to willing initiates, which increases the nature of exclusivity found with chordal singing.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, there has not been any literature produced that discusses how these initiates are chosen or accepted into the monastic circles that are able to teach chordal chanting.

### VI. Purpose of Chordal Chanting

One aspect of the chanting that has been difficult to fully discover is its ultimate purpose. Why do the monks chant in this unique and strange way? According to Goldman, Je Tzong Sherab Senge said the chanting style could unite practitioners in their consciousnesses, but he does not elaborate on what he means by this statement. Goldman also argues that the tones produced by the monks might invoke deities with whom the monks can eventually communicate, among them Yama, the Slayer of Death.<sup>49</sup> In order to appease such deities, rituals such as chordal chanting are performed as an offering. This is a view argued by Mabbett as well, but he discusses an interaction between a practitioner and a helpful deity; Mabbett argues that the music of the chanting acts as an offering to the deities, such as the celestial and transcendent Buddhas.<sup>50</sup> Goldman cites Huston Smith as arguing that the chanting shifts “the sacred from peripheral to focal

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>49</sup> Goldman, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Mabbett, 22.

awareness.”<sup>51</sup> This means that the chanter uses the tones to create an interaction with a higher spiritual state, which could be a transcendent state above what one normally experiences in the physical world.

Another possible use of chordal chanting might be to disguise the words of the sacred texts of Buddhism. The monks could use certain sounds and overtones to represent and act as symbols for important theological aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. Although this theory is not extensively discussed, it is plausible when one considers the aforementioned reluctance of Tibetan Buddhists to share their customs and rituals with non-Westerners and especially non-practitioners of Buddhism. Alfred Tomatis, a scholar of chanting throughout the world, argues “due to the high altitude of Tibet it was necessary to chant in the extremely deep voice in order to create higher overtones,” an argument also asserted by Lobsang Lhalungpa.<sup>52</sup> Although this theory is interesting, neither scholar divulges more information as to why they argue this possibility. Peter Michael Hamel theorizes, according to Goldman, that the unique tones created by the monks were used to affect their *chakras* as mentioned above. This would, of course, support Goldman’s goal of promoting chanting for healing purposes.

There is also a belief in the monks as vehicles for the sounds they produce. This means that the human body cannot be physically manipulated to create the deep tones, but the chanter must become aware of some ‘other level.’ Robert Thurman put it like this: “Only those who have reached a certain stage in this meditation can become open

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<sup>51</sup> Goldman, 66.

<sup>52</sup> Lhalungpa, 2.

enough to be vessels of this sound. The sound is produced by persons, who while present, are aware on a level in which they are not present.”<sup>53</sup> Lhalungpa argues that chordal chanting is simply another way to advance on the path toward enlightenment, basically the argument made earlier for chanting used as a way to block out the worldly things and focus on the peripheral, the sacred, world. Chanting focuses the awareness of the individual on an inner transformation in an effort to achieve enlightenment. This journey toward enlightenment “can be discovered through traversing many paths; music is definitely one such avenue in the life of Tibetan initiates. But it is always a means to an end, not an end in itself.”<sup>54</sup> The tones produced by the chanter and the music that accompanies it all serve to remind the practitioners of enlightenment, which is where they will find “ultimate harmony” if they properly continue their ritual actions.<sup>55</sup>

Another use for chanting is to use the sounds as a way to calm the mind and focus on achieving enlightenment. The unique form of chanting in chords acts as a “conduit by which, temporarily, the line between the two realms is breached and contact is made with the transcendent.”<sup>56</sup> This contact with the transcendent energies of the world lies at the core of every major world religion as people attempt to give meaning and purpose to their existence. The monks attempt to use chanting in order to deal with the mysterious sacred energies that are present in the world in an attempt to discover “the short routes to

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<sup>53</sup> Goldman, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Lhalungpa, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>56</sup> Mabbett, 11.

Nirvana,” a characteristic of many Tibetan Buddhist practices.<sup>57</sup> Chordal chanting helps the practitioner move beyond the traditional path toward enlightenment in an effort to increase spiritual awareness and experience sooner. In most sects of Buddhism, music has not been used for religious worship and ceremony, but the chordal chanting of the monks in the Tibetan tradition has been used for ‘inward’ purposes. Even though some Tibetan Buddhist monks now travel and ‘perform’ in venues across the globe, their focus is always supposed to be on their inward mindset, which has been described as a form of chanting meditation. In the West, music is generally used for the pleasure of the audience, whereas the chanting of the monks focuses on silence and restraint of the mind.<sup>58</sup> This idea is also found within Zen Buddhism, in which chanting can be used to “perceive universal substance.”<sup>59</sup> The purpose of the chanting is to focus inwardly and become the vessel of sound as argued earlier by Robert Thurman. Mabbett, however, argues that chanting would sometimes be employed for the benefit of an audience of practitioners as well, because it can alter “the consciousness of those present” and induce a state of trance.<sup>60</sup>

Huston Smith compares the sound of the chanting to the sound of a gong. When a gong is struck, there are many tones produced, from a deep fundamental to a variety of overtones and harmonics. The tones produced extend “from the lowest tone of human

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>58</sup> Khantipalo.

<sup>59</sup> Seung Sahn, “Perceive Universal Sound,” *Primary Point* 5, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>60</sup> Mabbett, 24.

perception to the highest, and the tone does not cease.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the sound of the gong encompasses all other sounds, and the listener cannot accurately pick out all of the specific overtones. “In the sound of the gong there is all that there is; it is one. The object of the spiritual quest is to experience life as one hears the gong, replete with overtones that tell of a ‘more’ that can be sensed but not seen, sensed but not said, heard but not explicitly.”<sup>62</sup>

Germano mentions another use for sound and chanting within Tibetan Buddhism. He discussed the importance of chanting certain mantras in an effort to deal with “nonhuman spirits” such as “hindering demons” and the “Lord of Death.”<sup>63</sup> These mantras serve to protect the practitioner from the spirits and their destructive powers. The spirits are believed to sometimes interfere with a person’s life, and one’s life can be cut short by the demons if not dealt with properly, so the practitioner chants a mantra such as the one that follows:

Take it away, take it away, O powerful ones!  
 May craving, attachment, and addictions,  
 Memory, apprehension, thought, and contact  
 Be relaxed, calmed, and freed!<sup>64</sup>

Once this mantra has been chanted seven times, “for up to three years one is free from any possibility of untimely death due to the agitation of internal elements and untimely

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, 212.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>63</sup> Donald S. Lopez, Jr, ed. *Religions of Tibet in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 471.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

death due to demonic forces.”<sup>65</sup> There is a limit on how often this rite can be performed, however, as Germano states it should only be performed once every three years.

Weedon argues that the Buddha’s teachings on suffering are especially relevant in Tibet, because there are believed to be innumerable demons and non-human spirits that inhabit the region. This is a teaching that Weedon argues was carried over from the Bon tradition, and Weedon showed that the Tibetan Buddhists do in fact accept and acknowledge the existence of spirits associated with the ‘White Bon’ tradition.<sup>66</sup> In order to deal with these spirits, practitioners must take part in “all manner of unreasonable sacrifices and incantations.”<sup>67</sup> Weedon’s doubts aside, the Tibetans believe that steps must be taken to appease the otherworldly beings that have some sort of power and control over this world. Chanting is one such rite that seeks to interact with and overcome these spirits.

## VII. Further Questions and Observations

The exclusivity of the practice of chordal chanting has made it into a sacred ceremony, at least when the criteria outlined by Durkheim is followed. The monks have set chordal chanting apart from the outside world, and this has transformed the ritual into something ‘special’ and ‘mystical.’ Scholars have attempted to discover the method behind the technique for themselves but have been mostly unsuccessful up to this point. Even within Buddhism, this chanting style has been set apart as purely Tibetan, partly

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Weedon, 170.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

because of its exclusiveness geographically. Only Tibetan Buddhists chant in this particular style, and only the Gyume and Gyuto Tantric Monasteries teach the method to practitioners. One must wonder if and when the sacred act of chordal chanting, like rituals in so many other religious traditions, will lose its sacredness as a result of increased exposure to the non-Buddhist population of the world.

William Graham picked up on the importance placed on oral transmission in most major religious traditions. He discussed its role in the Hindu religious tradition, but his thoughts also apply to the practice of chordal chanting within Tibetan Buddhism. Graham states that the Hindu practitioners were definitely able to write down their religious teachings, but they did not because there was a “conscious choice of oral transmission as the only appropriate vehicle for holy utterance.”<sup>68</sup> There is something about the mysterious power of sound within religion that attracts practitioners to hearing a teaching and passing it on to another practitioner. In order to accurately master the art of chordal chanting, the Tibetan Buddhists focused on creating experts who then took on individuals as students. These students then became masters in their own rights as a result of many years of devoted study of the practice and were able to pass on their craft as had been done for many previous generations.

Dreyfus argued that the Tibetan’s reliance on oral transmission of texts and ritual practices is central to their preservation. In order to guarantee the validity of ritual practices, Tibetan Buddhists rely on oral transmission as a way to trace their teachings back to the original authority on a subject or practice. In most cases this would be the

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<sup>68</sup> William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68.

Buddha himself, but in the case of chordal chanting it would be Je Tzong Sherab Senge and the Tantric Colleges he founded. The reliable chain of transmission provides “an aura of authority [which] arises from a felt connection with the originator of the tradition.”<sup>69</sup> Since this chain is so important to the integrity of a ritual, Tibetans spend a lot of time verifying the accuracy of their teachings. Another reason for the importance of oral transmission mentioned by Dreyfus is that questions of interpretation seldom arise when such a rigid transmission structure exists. The teacher is entrusted to instruct his students in the correct, accepted interpretations of textual and ritual meanings. As a result of this practice of final authority on questions of interpretation, “most [students] adopt their teachers’ opinions, often to the dot.”<sup>70</sup>

It is also important to note the missing voice, another lacunae, in this discussion on Tibetan Buddhist chordal chanting. A careful reading of this paper will notice no mention of women being involved in this ritual. In fact, there are only three female scholars cited, Pegg, Gyasto, and Tokarska-Bakir, and Pegg dealt more with what she argued was the secular, Mongolian form of chanting styles than with the Tibetan one. The fact is that chordal chanting has always revolved around men. A man supposedly discovered the technique, and then he taught it to other male monks who carried on the practice through a strictly male chain of transmission. One would think scholars have probably debated reasons for women’s exclusion from the practice; a common argument

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<sup>69</sup> Georges B.J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 154.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.



could possibly be that women cannot physically reproduce the sounds of the male chanters. The strange thing is that the literature does not even give explanations for a lack of female involvement. Even if women could not physically produce the deep fundamental tones of the male chanters, one would think a 'feminine style' of overtone chanting would have developed over the course of history, but no mention of this is made in the reading.

Rita Gross discussed Yeshe Tsogyel, a well-known female Tibetan Buddhist religious leader, and her relationship to the religion as a female practitioner and leader. Gross used Tsogyel to show that women's relationships to men are often described with regard to their "aids or detriments" when dealing with the path toward liberation and enlightenment. Gross argues that more should be said about the details of these relationships, such as Tsogyel's intimate connection with Padmasambhava, the founder of Tantric/Tibetan Buddhism, which served to foster both his and her spiritual developments. Padmasambhava told Tsogyel, "Without a consort, a partner of skillful means, there is no way you can experience the mysteries of Tantra."<sup>71</sup> Thus, there appears to be no chance for women to advance within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhism unless the lamas are willing to take them as consorts and teach them in the mysteries of the religion.

Tsogyel was instrumental in "establishing, spreading, and perpetuating the teaching" of Tibetan Buddhism in India. She also took both male and female disciples, so there does not appear to have been the same type of gender bias in the eighth century

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<sup>71</sup> Willis, 16.

state.”<sup>75</sup> When a practitioner reaches a higher level of awareness, he or she begins to understand that anything can become possible. This awareness allows one to realize that the illusions and images encountered in the bardo are nothing more than projections of the mind and that one can then achieve liberation through their heightened consciousness. Willis states, “Formal practice may have prepared the mind for such a state, but the final moment dawns spontaneously, like flowers blossoming in the sky.”<sup>76</sup>

In a discussion on Tibetan nuns and nunneries, Karma Lekshe Tsomo mentioned that nuns routinely practiced a form of chanting along with their daily meditation and scriptural study, although Tsomo does not go into detail as to the nature of the chanting, so it is therefore most likely that they merely chanted mantras or other scriptures. It is likely that the nuns were not allowed to learn such practices as chordal chanting, however, because “in theory, religious practice by men and women was regarded as equally praiseworthy, but in reality a subtle tendency developed to place greater value on the efforts of men in spiritual matters.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, men took over and controlled access to the practice of chordal chanting, and they did not wish to hand over the spiritual authority they had gained through the practice.

Perhaps there will be more investigation by scholars into the lack of feminine influence on Tibetan chordal chanting in the coming years. Hopefully Tibetan Buddhists will continue in their newfound willingness to share their religious practices with scholars

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 122.

and more information about the history of the practice will be uncovered and discussed in the near future. The ideal situation for academia would involve the monks sharing the secrets of how they produce the chords, thus removing the 'mysteriousness' of the practice; this would result in scholars focusing on other aspects of the ritual, like the question of female involvement. The problem with this is that the Tibetans risk outsiders taking their sacred ritual and popularizing it, thus possibly removing the sacred quality of chordal chanting. Until this issue is resolved, there is a gap, a lacunae, of silence in the scholarship about women's possible relationship with chordal chanting.

### VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, chordal chanting is a unique and fascinating practice employed by a very small minority of practitioners within Buddhism. The monks who can chant in this style are very highly trained, and the exclusiveness of this ritual is very clearly evident to the outside observer. The monks, and their ability to chant in chords, are set apart during the ritual as partakers of something that reaches beyond the visible world into a higher, transcendent sacred realm of reality. This practice fits Durkheim's definition of what is sacred, namely that it is forbidden to the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners but is nevertheless held in high esteem as an important religious ritual, especially by those who have been initiated in the practice and are able to control its usage within the religion.

The chords produced by the monks are difficult to reproduce without proper instruction, although some scholars have attempted this feat and have even marketed themselves as teachers of chordal singing. This is a problem, as such a sacred practice is on the verge of being manipulated and popularized among Westerners like so many other Eastern religious practices. This will inevitably result in the continuation of an isolationist worldview from the Tibetan Buddhists, because they will be reluctant to share the practice of chordal singing if it is in danger of becoming secularized and marketed to Western populations.

The Tibetans have remained secretive of this practice until very recently, and even now there are many aspects of chordal chanting that remain a mystery to scholars. Despite this exclusivity, researchers are now beginning to learn about this important religious ritual that is employed as an avenue on the path toward enlightenment. It will be interesting to see how interest in the topic of chordal chanting develops over the coming years, because the scholarship is indeed lacking, but Tibetan Buddhists must either allow researchers access into their rituals or must write about their practices in depth themselves if there will ever be any scholarly headway into this process.

## Chapter 3: The Tibetan Book of the Dead

### I. Introduction

According to Donald Lopez, it appears to many outside scholars who observe the Tibetan culture that the Tibetan people focus more on death than their Western counterparts. He asserts that this is not true, merely that the Tibetans, especially those who follow Tibetan Buddhist practices, tend to prepare for death more openly and frequently than other cultures in the world. As noted earlier, Tibetan Buddhists stress the importance of memorizing sacred texts, such as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, hereafter referred to as the TBD, so that they will be able to recall its teachings once they enter the *bardo* of death. This recall will greatly aid the deceased person while the lama also recites the text over the dead body. Tibetans will also sometimes read other sutras and prayers in order to “go to great lengths to affect favorably the state of mind of the dying person.”<sup>78</sup> Sound takes a prominent role in Tibetan Buddhist death rituals, and the sacred quality of sound is instrumental in delivering a person’s consciousness from rebirth. The use of sound is key to the whole process because sound energy, just like in the case of chordal chanting, helps the practitioner to reach a higher plane of understanding and involvement within the religious tradition, thus making it sacred.

Janet Gyasto discusses the Bon influences on early Tibetan Buddhism, namely the integration of rituals and practices concerning death. She argues that the rites surrounding the TBD that were spread by Padmasambhava were a leftover influence of the Bon. The concern with malevolent spirits is also concerned with “demarcating the

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<sup>78</sup> Lopez, 442.

difference between the realm of the living and that of the dead.”<sup>79</sup> The Tibetan people wish to rid themselves of the harmful effects of the spirits encountered after death, so they have refined techniques for passing through the *bardo* safely and more quickly. Thanks to the indigenous teachings of the Bon that dealt with death ritual, Buddhism has been able to cultivate the idea that death must be taken seriously and people need to prepare for its eventual occurrence. This belief is found within all Buddhist sects, namely the idea that suffering will continue as long as the body exists, so one must attempt to rid oneself of suffering by escaping from the cycle of rebirth.

Maurice Cohen describes the attitude toward death found in the TBD as a “supreme opportunity,” since it gives a person the chance to put what he or she learned in life to use trying to escape from the cycle of rebirth and obtain liberation.<sup>80</sup> A person will be able to positively influence what happens at death if he or she has taken the time to study the teachings that deal with death in Tibetan Buddhism. Cohen argues that the text can be of use to a person “regardless of intelligence or past behavior.”<sup>81</sup> People are certainly influenced by their learning and patterning of *karma* once they die, but what Cohen argues is that the TBD can be of benefit because it helps a person understand what they encounter in the *bardo*. Also, “it is during the actual process of dying that the mind is most clear and the individual is therefore most capable of discovering his true nature.”<sup>82</sup> If someone “recognizes instantaneously while dying the true nature of his

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<sup>79</sup> Willis, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Maurice Cohen, “Dying as Supreme Opportunity: A Comparison of Plato’s “Phaedo” and “The Tibetan Book of the Dead,”” *Philosophy East and West* 26, no. 3 (July 1976), 317.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

being,” then that person will be able to immediately obtain liberation and escape from the remainder of the levels of the *bardo*.<sup>83</sup>

William Graham defines scripture as “any text [that is] perceived in some sense as a prime locus of verbal contact with transcendent truth, or ultimate reality.”<sup>84</sup> This definition most certainly applies to the TBD, because its teachings are taken by practitioners to be an ‘ultimate truth’ that helps them deal with death and their individual struggle for enlightenment. In this particular case, Graham’s definition also applies in an unintended way, since it is so important that the text be read out loud for the benefit of the deceased’s consciousness. Based on Graham’s definition, the TBD fits firmly into the definition of a religious scripture, even though it may not fit into the more traditional idea of scripture, and its focus on the sacred quality of sound is the center of the discussion of its place within Tibetan Buddhism.

The TBD is a unique type of scripture in that it is a *terma* text. This term means that the text was hidden at some point by a spiritual leader who wanted future practitioners to find it and discover the teachings within. *Terma* can also refer to “the discovery of teachings in the depths of the mind.”<sup>85</sup> In the case of the TBD, Padmasambhava was the one who hid the text in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE in the Gampopa Hills, and Karma Lingpa discovered it in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>86</sup> Those who discover a *terma* text are called *tertöns*. The TBD is perhaps the most famous *terma* text, but there are others, such as the *Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>84</sup> Graham, 68.

<sup>85</sup> Skilton, 189.

<sup>86</sup> Francesca Fremantle, trans. and Chögyam Trungpa, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992), viii.

Tokarska-Bakir also mentions a debate among scholars between what she has termed 'low' culture and 'high' culture. She cites Eliade as opposing "[easier] paths leading to the sacred... such as mantras, prayers and pilgrimage to more difficult ones, such as gnosis, asceticism, and yoga."<sup>87</sup> Many scholars are divided between these two groups and concentrate their scholarship on one or the other. This division is also commonly made based on the inclusion or exclusion of writing in ritual practices, but Tokarska-Bakir argues that this would not be appropriate for the Tibetan tradition since the highest and most sacred teachings of some ritual practices were preserved orally, which is the case with regard to chordal chanting.

Cohen observed that the TBD is unique in the fact that the levels of the *bardo* pass from a higher state of good for the person to a lower state. He argues, "We [Westerners] are accustomed to accounts of *ascent*, not *descent*."<sup>88</sup> He uses literary figures such as Plato, Augustine, and Dante to support this argument, and he then discusses the trait of the TBD as the unique case. As a person fails to obtain liberation with each level of the *bardo*, the "trials become more fearsome and the rewards relatively less desirable" until one is reborn.<sup>89</sup> The text is also unique in its willingness to discuss those fearsome traits of the lower *bardo* levels according to Cohen. Thus, the practitioner seeks to gain liberation as quickly as possible so as to avoid these terrifying lower levels of the *bardo*.

Jackson discusses the perceived tension in Tibetan Buddhism between "religious belief based upon scriptural authority and contemplative knowledge drawn from first-

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<sup>87</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 72.

<sup>88</sup> Cohen, 323.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 322.



hand, personal inquiry.”<sup>90</sup> Jackson states that the Tibetans have always tried to keep these two forms of religious practice in balance and harmony, and he argues that they now adhere to one method while disclaiming the other as invalid. In his view, Tibetan Buddhists have abandoned reliance on scripture for authority and now only rely on experiential rituals such as chordal chanting. “Scholars [who] devote themselves exclusively to textual study [disclaim] the present possibility of experiential knowledge; while contemplatives disdain textual knowledge as dry intellectualism, thereby reducing their tradition to a system of theoretically barren techniques.”<sup>91</sup> Wallace then went on to mention Steven Katz’s theory that the mystic practices of religions, which would include Tibetan chordal chanting and the death rituals associated with the TBD, would fall into the category of contemplative, experiential knowledge. The problem with mystic practices, according to Katz, is that they “define, in advance, the types of experiences a contemplative [person] wants to have and does eventually have.”<sup>92</sup> Katz would argue, for example, that the glimpses of enlightenment experienced during chordal chanting or in the text of the TBD are nothing more than a fabrication of the practitioner in advance of the practice of these rituals.

Dreyfus argues that sound is a central aspect of any Tibetan Buddhist monastery. This echoes the earlier chapter that showed how chordal chanting within certain monastic circles is essential to how these Tibetan Buddhists participate in their religious experience. His time living in a Tibetan monastery has convinced him that the Tibetans are more devoted to rituals and studies than meditation. Instead of the quiet atmosphere

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<sup>90</sup> Roger Jackson and John Makransky, ed. *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (Curzon: Curzon Press, 2000), 203.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

found in many Buddhist monasteries, the monks of Tibet are constantly engaged in some sort of noisy activity or ritual. Dreyfus described the scene as a “cacophony” of sound, including ritual chanting to start each day, which is followed by the sound of monks reciting specific scriptures in memorization practices or by the sound of debates and further ritual chanting.<sup>93</sup> There can also be the sound of lamas instructing their disciples in specific scriptures that will later be used for memorization. The practice of reading a text aloud is a common practice in these Tibetan monasteries, because it greatly aids in their memorization. According to Dreyfus, “vocalizing a text in a rhythmic pattern helps it penetrate one’s mind, where it starts to take on a life of its own.”<sup>94</sup> He also mentions the argument that “silent reading is largely a modern phenomenon” that resulted from the increased availability of printed books.<sup>95</sup> In order to memorize the texts aurally, students rely on specific rhythms and tunes to aid their recall of scriptures and ritual teachings. Dreyfus stated that the students “concentrate entirely on the text’s sonic pattern” in order to memorize it, but he did not go into a description of the exact meaning of this statement.<sup>96</sup> Wallace also mentions the importance of hearing a text as an aid to its memorization. He theorizes, “Understanding derived from hearing (including textual study) consists of the intellectual comprehension of Buddhist doctrine.”<sup>97</sup>

Dreyfus also raised the question of whether all the noise in a Tibetan monastery might interfere with the process of learning or memorization, but he came to the conclusion that it in fact enhances one’s ability to memorize the scriptures. Dreyfus

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<sup>93</sup> Dreyfus, 87.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Jackson, 204.

noted, “When students hear each other, their energy and focus are reinforced. They are supported by the feeling of participating in a common task and pushed to memorize more than they might on their own. At times, a kind of competition develops in which students try to outlast each other, vying to produce the last tune to be heard.”<sup>98</sup> One must wonder if these situations are present within the monasteries where chordal chanting is taught to initiates.

Tokarska-Bakir discusses the Tibetan beliefs on liberation through using the senses, and she included “all those religious behaviors-such as listening to and repeating mantras, circumambulation of stupas, looking at sacred images, tasting relics-which are accompanied by a belief that sensual contact with a sacred object can give one hope and even certainty of achieving liberation.”<sup>99</sup> The practice of chordal chanting and the hearing of the TBD both fall into this definition of liberation through the senses. In fact, Tokarska-Bakir called the text “the classic example of liberation through the senses.”<sup>100</sup> In contrast to some of the other scholars cited with regard to the TBD, Tokarska-Bakir argues that sensual liberation is not about using any senses that are different from the normal, everyday ones that people are used to experiencing. This form of liberation is possible through “man’s simple exoteric sight and also through hearing, taste, touch, and memory.”<sup>101</sup> Hearing is, of course, central to the discussion on the TBD and its function of liberating a consciousness from rebirth.

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<sup>98</sup> Dreyfus, 89.

<sup>99</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 69.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

## II. Liberation as a Goal

Fremantle mentions that many people enjoy reading the TBD because of its vivid images and promise of another life after the *bardo* state for those who cannot escape *samsara*. She emphasizes the importance of this escape and the role the text will play in the process of this release, namely that hearing the text can provide the means by which one can gain liberation. Interestingly, the text shows how a person in the *bardo* state encounters a sense of self that resembles the physical body before death. “The subtle imprints or traces in the mind create the feeling of having a body like the old one, with all its senses intact.”<sup>102</sup> Fremantle compares this to the senses experienced during a dream. Even though a person does not use the actual senses of seeing, hearing, etc. during the dream state, the person believes he or she still has the real experiences of the senses. While in the *bardo* state, a person will interpret any sort of communication, such as hearing the sound of the recited text, as an actual experience of the senses.

The liberation of a person from the continuous cycle of suffering in this world is the ultimate goal of the TBD. One term for this liberation is Nirvana, which “cannot be intellectually realized, because it is beyond intellect. Not being relative to any thing, it transcends relativity; and, being beyond conception, is of the Voidness.”<sup>103</sup> Specifically, a person can attain this liberation by merely hearing the words of the sacred text. This idea has an Eastern precedent in another Eastern tradition, Hinduism, in which “Indra has a heavenly drum, the sound of which is so moving that people develop profound insights

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<sup>102</sup> Francesca Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 46.

<sup>103</sup> W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation: The Method of Realizing Nirvana Through Knowing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

from merely hearing it.”<sup>104</sup> It is also important to note the other five types of liberation: “liberation through wearing, liberation through seeing, liberation through remembering, liberation through tasting, and liberation through touching.”<sup>105</sup> These types of liberation all refer to different terma texts. Tokarska-Bakir made it clear what she meant by the terms ‘liberation’ and ‘salvation.’ They both refer to an existence beyond the cycle of suffering in a state of Nirvana. “Liberation, or enlightenment, is the moment when this goal is attained.”<sup>106</sup> Once an individual can recognize the freedom from this cycle, then that person has received the goal of liberation.

The Dalai Lama also discusses what he describes as ‘cyclic existence’ and the need for one to understand how to overcome this stage, especially through the use of the TBD as a means for liberation. This is his term for the *bardo* stage that occurs after death, and he argues that it is divided into three realms: a realm of desire, a realm of forms, and a formless realm. In the first of these, the desire realm, the person takes pleasure in the five physical senses, including the ability to hear sounds. Once the person enters the formless realm, “all forms, sounds, odours, tastes and tangible objects and the five senses for enjoying them are absent.”<sup>107</sup> The reason a person gets stuck in such ‘cyclic existence’ and must pass through the different realms is because a person’s actions have been tainted with the afflictions mentioned above such as desire and attachment. According to the Dalai Lama, the purpose of ‘cyclic existence’ is “to provide

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<sup>104</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 75.

<sup>105</sup> Fremantle and Trungpa, vii.

<sup>106</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 103.

<sup>107</sup> Jeffrey Hopkins, trans. & ed. *The Buddhism of Tibet: His Holiness the Dalai Lama* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1975), 25.

a basis for suffering and to induce suffering in the future.”<sup>108</sup> If a person gets caught up in and accustomed to the sufferings caused by the cycle of rebirth, then he or she will surely become stuck in ‘cyclic existence.’

The Dalai Lama teaches, “Cyclic existence means bondage, and liberation means freedom from this bondage.”<sup>109</sup> The goal of a person who has died is to find a release from the ‘cyclic existence’ mentioned above by getting rid of the afflictions which got him or her there in the first place. One must be sure to not only eliminate the roots of one’s afflictions, but also make sure not to partake in any other activities that cause desire, suffering, etc. before one’s death. This entire process is focused on the cultivation of the mind, which has control over the entire body, as mentioned previously. According to the Dalai Lama, there are two types of liberation from bondage. The first occurs when one rids the mind and body of all sufferings and their causes. The second is the “great, unsurpassed liberations, the rank of Buddhahood [which is] an utter extinguishing of both the afflictions and the obstructions to omniscience.”<sup>110</sup>

Geshe Ngawang Dargye calls the goal of the TBD “consciousness transference.”<sup>111</sup> In order to properly influence the experiences of the *bardo* and ultimately influence the state of future rebirth, one must have the ability to control the mind and keep it focused on liberation instead of the projections encountered in the *bardo*. Even if a person developed positive *karma* while living but did not focus on training the mind and cultivating awareness, then he or she will be easily distracted at the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>111</sup> Glenn H. Mullin, *Living in the Face of Death: The Tibetan Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1998), 83.

moment of death and will likely fail to achieve liberation. However, Dargye does argue, “The immediate rebirth is strongly determined by the mental framework at the exact moment of death.”<sup>112</sup> Therefore, one might not achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth, but if someone has a positive mental state at the time of death, then that person’s rebirth will be positive.

Robert Wicks concisely summed up his views on the purpose of the TBD. In short, the text “speaks to the dead person who, as a disembodied spirit, is believed to persist within hearing distance in an after-death realm of transition.”<sup>113</sup> This means that the *bardo* state lies in a sort of realm that is nearby but not necessarily sensed by people in the tangible world. He does, however, question the idea that a person’s consciousness can actually hear a recitation once it has entered the *bardo* state. He argues, “There remains the issue of whether there is indeed any communicational interface at all between the world of the living and the world of the dead.”<sup>114</sup> Regardless, the recitation of the text is supposed to be for the benefit of the deceased, since its teachings attempt to lead him or her toward enlightenment through the vocalization of the teaching.

Tsong-kha-pa, who lived from 1357 to 1419, states that at the time of one’s death, nothing is going to benefit a person except for the religious practice that was undertaken while alive. He argues that friends, resources, and even a person’s body will not help once death occurs. His reasoning is that a person cannot take any of these things with him or her into the afterlife, so therefore they are going to be of no value to a person, especially in the endeavor to obtain liberation. He asserts that “at the time of death only

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>113</sup> Wicks, 479.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 486.

religious practice will serve as a refuge, a protection, a defense” since one must seek guidance from the teachings one worked so hard to learn while living.<sup>115</sup> It would also be interesting to know if Tsong-kha-pa believes that chordal chanting techniques would be of any help to a consciousness after death.

### III. Preparation for Liberation

Tibetan Buddhists regard the human life experience to be a very important one since humans have the mental capacity to greatly influence and improve their consciousnesses in an effort to obtain liberation. In fact, “to be born as a human being... [is] a great blessing” because one can “cultivate all perfections of the spirit.”<sup>116</sup> This would include learning the text of the TBD as well as perfecting spiritual techniques such as chordal chanting. According to Geshe Ngawang Dargye, a human has the ability to not only obtain liberation, but also to become a Buddha. This chance is unique because what he terms “lesser forms of life” do not have the resources needed to achieve this feat.<sup>117</sup> The only catch is that it is still up to a person to cultivate their consciousness in a way that is advantageous to him or her both while living and after death. Dargye stated that it is unfortunate that so many people waste their opportunity and fail to obtain liberation.

In order to prepare for the unavoidable moment of death, a person should constantly meditate on the thought of death. If one always keeps death on the mind, then

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<sup>115</sup> Guy Newland, ed. Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment Vol. One* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), 158.

<sup>116</sup> Mullin, 71.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



“life becomes increasingly meaningful.”<sup>118</sup> Geshe Ngawang Dargye cites the following passage from *The Sutra of Buddha’s Entering into Parinirvana* to support this argument:

Of all footprints,  
That of the elephant is supreme. Similarly,  
Of all mindfulness meditations,  
That on death is supreme.<sup>119</sup>

Also, studying texts such as the TBD helps a person to understand what happens after death and prepares one for the experience. It is important to realize that “not everything dies at death, only the body and the works of this life.”<sup>120</sup> Someone’s consciousness and its tendencies continue on into the *bardo*, unless one obtains liberation of course, and the actions performed while living ultimately shape how one reacts to death and what one experiences in the *bardo*. Also, if a person fails to achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth, then the consciousness and its tendencies will continue on into the next life.

Fremantle mentions the importance of one’s encounter with the text of the TBD. She emphasizes that there is no coincidence when a person reads or hears the text recited. The TBD was produced for the benefit of all living beings, therefore when someone encounters it, there is a positive effect on the consciousness of that person. Wallace notes the importance of Padmasambhava hiding the text and then its future discovery, calling it a “spiritual time-capsule” which was found “when the time was ripe for [it] to be revealed.”<sup>121</sup> Fremantle argues, “To hear it or read it at all implies that either in this life or in past lives we have made some connection with it.”<sup>122</sup> She states that the encounters

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>121</sup> Jackson, 206.

<sup>122</sup> Fremantle, 50.

with the sacred, in this case a text, allow a person to connect with something beyond the superficial world, and these connections give someone a glimpse of enlightenment. Even if the person does not believe in the teachings contained within the text, he or she opens up the consciousness to an element of the sacred which might result in liberation at a future time, especially when the text is recited during the *bardo* state. Tokarska-Bakir did ask, however, “Can a person who fails to understand that which liberates be liberated?”<sup>123</sup>

Robert Wicks argues that the text is more for the benefit of the living than the dead, and he once again cites the skepticism that one can communicate with a deceased person once he or she has entered the *bardo*. In his view, the text serves to “bring an individual into a condition of increased psychic health.”<sup>124</sup> This is achieved by raising a person’s awareness of those parts of the subconscious that causes the suffering and attachment that characterize being stuck in the cycle of rebirth. A person should use the teachings of the text to better understand his or her faults in an effort to cultivate mindfulness which not only aids in the *bardo*, but according to Wicks can also aid one’s mental health while living, which is an argument that Goldman would support when discussing how he believes chordal chanting can benefit a person’s physical healing process.

The Dalai Lama stresses the importance of truly understanding the meaning of religious practice and using rites and rituals in order to affect the mind, not just using them as an outward expression of religious belief. The key for his belief is whether or

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<sup>123</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 74.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Wicks, “The Therapeutic Psychology of “The Tibetan Book of the Dead,”” *Philosophy East and West* 47 no. 4 (Oct. 1997), 487.

not one can internalize the teachings of a practice into one's own thought processes. Meditation, the recitation of scriptures, chordal chanting, etc. do not do a practitioner any good unless he or she uses those practices to cultivate the mind and prepare it for the journey after life. "If one knows how to bring the teachings into one's own thought, all physical and verbal deeds can be made to accord with practice."<sup>125</sup> In other words, being mindful of the teachings can enhance the religious experience and aid in the actual practice of specific rites and rituals.

Tsong-kha-pa mentions that there are three faults that people inherently have that inhibit them from properly receiving the teachings of the TBD while living. The first is simply that people sometimes do not pay attention. Even if one sits in the presence of a lama or studies the teachings for oneself, no good is done unless that person completely pays attention to the words of the text and allows the teaching to embed itself in the consciousness. This way one can accurately remember the teachings once death has occurred and one has entered the *bardo*. The second fault of people is that they sometimes "misunderstand what is heard or listen with a bad motivation such as attachment."<sup>126</sup> This is perhaps most common for the general practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism who wishes to be instructed in the rites surrounding death, as there are many teachings in the TBD that are anything but simple to understand. He also mentions that attachment to life is one of the major obstacles to correctly hearing the teaching, since "everyone has the idea that death will come later."<sup>127</sup> The third fault is the lack of repetition of the teaching, so many people forget what they have heard. This is obviously

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<sup>125</sup> Hopkins, 32-33.

<sup>126</sup> Newland, 58.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 145.

dangerous, because one must be able to recall the teachings once death occurs in order to accelerate the consciousness on the path toward liberation. Tsong-kha-pa includes an easy remedy for these faults: “listen well, thoroughly, and hold it in mind. Listen while wanting to understand everything, staying one-pointed, attentive, with your mind focused, and reflecting with complete composure.”<sup>128</sup>

The actions undertaken by a person leave behind results that shape that person’s consciousness not only while living but also its state after death. The “consequence of... individual actions” develops into *karma*, and this affects a person’s mental state once one enters the *bardo* of death.<sup>129</sup> If someone develops positive *karma* while living, then he or she will find the passage through the *bardo* to be a much more pleasant experience. If, however, a person spends his or her life building up negative actions, then the projections experienced in the *bardo* of death will be much more terrifying and frightening to the person.

The consciousness of the person reciting the text must also be highly trained in experiencing those deeper levels in order to help guide the deceased through the *bardo* state. Fremantle argues, “In order to bring another person’s consciousness into the state of emptiness and clarity, one must be able to enter and remain in it oneself.”<sup>130</sup> According to Fremantle, as more time passes after death, the consciousness of the deceased will drift further away from its former host. This means that the abilities of the one reciting the text must be highly advanced if the deceased is to attain liberation. Ideally, “if the right circumstances come together, if the mind of the reader is stable

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>129</sup> Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1997), 69.

<sup>130</sup> Fremantle, 47.

enough and the mind of the dead person responsive enough, then the inherent power of the teaching itself may bring about liberation.”<sup>131</sup> Hopefully the consciousness of the deceased will become more aware of the recitations of the adept teacher and will gain liberation at a sooner time.

Germano included a list of ways, according to the Tibetans, that one can know if he or she is about to die. The list comes from *The Tantra of the Sun and Moon’s Intimate Union*.<sup>132</sup> The one most useful for the purposes of this paper is number seven: “if the sound of the *dakinis* ceases within the inner recesses of the cosmic mountain.”<sup>133</sup> This has been interpreted several different ways, one of which involves a person who believes he or she is about to die pressing the ear to the ground to listen for any sort of buzzing sound. The absence of any buzzing means that the person is sure to die within a period of about two weeks. Another interpretation states that the ‘cosmic mountain’ refers to a person’s head, so one should therefore “stop one’s ears up with one’s fingers and that hearing the normal sound like a drum roll indicates that all is well,” but no sound at all indicates certain death within five days.<sup>134</sup> It is obvious that these beliefs further illustrate the importance of sound and its involvement with the Tibetan rituals surrounding death.

#### IV. How it all Works

The teachings found within the TBD are so powerful that a person can gain liberation from merely hearing its words. If a person commits its teachings to memory, then that person can be liberated in the *bardo* state that immediately precedes death.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>132</sup> Lopez, 480.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

“Even if the Buddhas of the past, present and future were to search, they would not find a better teaching than this.”<sup>135</sup> The hearing of the text is able to liberate even those who have committed the worst errors while living as long as the person is receptive to the hearing while in the *bardo* state. Trungpa Rinpoche advised that one should read the text aloud and memorize it while living, even practicing it three times a day so that “its words and meaning should not be forgotten even if a hundred murderers were to appear and chase one.”<sup>136</sup>

In the work edited by Jeffrey Hopkins, the Dalai Lama discusses how one obtains liberation from the cycle of rebirth and gains enlightenment. According to him, speech, along with other physical uses of the body, is under the complete control of the mind. This makes the mind the part of a person that should be preferred and cultivated above all other things. He argues, “afflictions such as desire do not contaminate the nature of the mind, for the nature of the mind is pure, uncontaminated by any taint.”<sup>137</sup> The problem is that afflictions do affect the mind on a daily basis and distract it from the ultimate goal of liberation. It is through cultivation of the mind that one becomes able to overlook afflictions such as desire and attachment in an effort to remove those distractions from life. “This state of complete purification is Buddhahood,” meaning that once one rids oneself of these afflictions, that person can achieve liberation.<sup>138</sup>

According to Wicks, the text allows for a time of “decision making” in which the deceased chooses whether to be reborn in the world as a being who experiences suffering or whether to experience an enlightened state and escape from the cycle of rebirth. The

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<sup>135</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, 82.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>137</sup> Hopkins, 19.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

words of the text guide the deceased toward the choice of enlightenment, but according to Wicks, it is still up to that person's consciousness to make the decision. This characterization of the *bardo* as a place for decision-making is something not found in the other sources, and it seems to oversimplify the experience of the person traveling through the *bardo*.

Wicks compares the decision to escape rebirth and accept enlightenment to a common religious teaching of 'changing one's ways' or 'turning one's life around.' He argues that the basic teaching of the TBD is that "people who do not change their ways are fated painfully to repeat themselves," which refers to rebirth in the Tibetan case. Regardless of how one lived his or her life, the "unconscious tendencies" must be dealt with, and the projections encountered by a person in the *bardo* reflect the level of enlightenment one had attained while alive.<sup>139</sup> A person can increase his or her knowledge by studying the text under the teaching of a lama while living, and this knowledge will aid while passing through the *bardo*, since the person will remember the lessons from the text.

Fremantle discusses the role of sound once a person is in a *bardo* state, and she asked how it could be possible for someone to hear a text being read when that person has already died. Fremantle explains this phenomenon using a Buddhist view of "a continuous flow of moments of consciousness" which continues even after the physical body has died.<sup>140</sup> The normal level of consciousness we experience on a daily basis is only a small portion of what actually exists amongst living beings. Fremantle states that from a Western, scientific perspective, consciousness only exists in relation to the

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<sup>139</sup> Wicks, 480.

<sup>140</sup> Fremantle, 43.

workings of the brain and central nervous system, but the deeper, subtler levels of consciousness can be realized through meditation. These deeper levels are the ones experienced when in the *bardo* state, so the words of the text can still be transmitted to the consciousness of a person, but only if that person has been made aware of and trained in the totality of consciousness while living.

When a person dies and enters the *bardo* state, his or her consciousness remains close to the physical body and is able to experience everything going on around it. The consciousness will sense the presence of its former vessel, the corpse, and “will still feel an attachment to it.”<sup>141</sup> It will also be able to sense others around the corpse, such as family, friends, and the lama or other person reciting the text of the TBD. The consciousness of the deceased can hear not only the recitation but also the goings-on of the other people nearby, so it is important for those people to provide “an environment of calmness, warmth, and confidence” in order to help in the navigation through the *bardo* state.<sup>142</sup> Reading the sacred text aloud not only benefits the deceased but also the living, because the message contained in the verses can help them emotionally cope with such a difficult situation.

When the text is recited to the deceased, the actions performed while living are recalled and experienced in different ways that are described in the text itself. Even though there is much discourse on the visual experiences of the deceased, there is still much emphasis by people such as Trungpa Rinpoche on the ability of the text to provide liberation through its recitation and hearing alone. Much like the belief that partaking in chordal chanting can bring one closer to enlightenment, Rinpoche believes in the sacred

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



power of sound to advance the practitioner on the path toward liberation. Rinpoche states, “Whoever comes into contact with this teaching... receives a sudden glimpse of enlightenment through the power of transmission contained in these treasures.”<sup>143</sup> He argues that regardless of one’s attitude toward the teachings being recited, whether one doubts them or openly accepts them, that person has the opportunity for liberation before rebirth occurs.

According to Germano, there are also several practices and rites which should be performed in the presence of the corpse. These include making a mandala in front of the corpse which should be sprinkled with water and fragrant scents. There should also be a vase placed in the center of the mandala which is filled with “clean, pure water.”<sup>144</sup> Then one should “do the ritual service (of chanting and visualization) of *om ah hum svaha* one hundred thousand times.”<sup>145</sup> This chanting serves to bless the water contained inside the vase. The practitioner then chants *om a bhya rgya tam kem*, a mantra that serves to overcome and pacify the transgressions of the deceased person.<sup>146</sup> Thus, the sound of these chanted phrases has an immediate effect in the blessing of the water and the absolution of a person’s misdeeds while alive.

Geshe Ngawang Dargye argues that it is essential for friends and family of a deceased person to recite mantras and other helpful teachings into the ear of the body, since this can positively influence the consciousness, which remains in close proximity to the body for a short while. The purpose of these mantras is to keep the consciousness aware that it needs to be in control of what happens in the *bardo*. Also, “the sound of

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>144</sup> Lopez, 474.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 465.

[the] mantra can encourage the dying person to maintain appropriate attitudes.”<sup>147</sup> It is important for the deceased to maintain a positive outlook on his or her situation, because a negative attitude hinders one from obtaining liberation and might influence the nature of the rebirth. If the deceased was under the teaching of a lama while living then one should also recite the lama’s name into the deceased’s ear, as this will help the person remember the lama’s teachings while passing through the *bardo*.

With regards to the goal of Nirvana and the liberation from the cycle of rebirth and the experience of the *bardo* after death, Tsong-ka-pa mentioned the benefit of hearing the teachings of the TBD by listing some lines from *Verses About Hearing*, which is found in *Collection of Indicative Verses*, which are as follows:

Through hearing, phenomena are understood,  
Through hearing, wrongdoing is overcome,  
Through hearing, what is meaningless is eliminated,  
Through hearing, nirvana is attained.<sup>148</sup>

These verses reinforce what other scholars have stated, namely that through merely hearing the teachings in the TBD, one can obtain liberation, here referred to as Nirvana. The fact that the verses mention that what is meaningless is eliminated is also important, because the truth is that all of the things encountered in the *bardo* are essentially meaningless since they are only projections of the deceased’s own consciousness. When they are recognized as such, the deceased person is one step closer to achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Fremantle argues, “The fundamental teaching of this book is the recognition of one’s projections and the dissolution of the sense of self in the light of

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<sup>147</sup> Mullin, 86.

<sup>148</sup> Newland, 56.

reality. As soon as this is done... [they] become instead factors for enlightenment.”<sup>149</sup>

Another verse was also included by Tsong-kha-pa from the *Garland of Birth Stories*. It states, “The result of hearing is to engage in substantive practice; You will be released with little difficulty from the fortress of rebirth.”<sup>150</sup> This verse means that one is to remember what one has heard while living and then pay attention to the instruction of the lama once deceased in order to easily obtain liberation. If the deceased puts into practice what he or she has been taught, then the experience of the *bardo* will not be frightening and the time spent there will be shortened considerably.

Fremantle included a description of the sound that is encountered during the *bardo* state. She says that not only the sound but also the display of light are both overwhelming when first sensed, and this overload of the senses can sometimes seem frightening to those who are not aware of their harmlessness. “These phenomena are terrifying because they are so raw and intense.”<sup>151</sup> Since the consciousness is no longer protected by the physical constraints of the body, it is more easily frightened by the intense perceptions. According to the text, “a great roar of thunder [is] the natural sound of the dharmata, like a thousand thunderclaps simultaneously.”<sup>152</sup> Even the sounds encountered in the *bardo* state must be recognized as displays of the deceased person’s own projections, things produced as a result of actions performed while living. If the deceased does not recognize these sounds as a mere projection, then he or she will be frightened by them and will continue on in *samsara* with no chance of liberation.

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<sup>149</sup> Fremantle and Trungpa, xxii.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>151</sup> Fremantle, 256.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

Another message found within the TBD is that there is a difference between “the real and the unreal, the transitory [and] the non-transitory.”<sup>153</sup> The deceased must understand that the world experienced while in the *bardo* state is not the real world experienced while alive, but rather it is a world of appearances, of images and projections of one’s own mental capacities. The wisdom of the living is based on the physical senses that are trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth. These senses “must be yogically disciplined, and all misleading mental concepts [must] be dominated.”<sup>154</sup> One must tap into a deeper level of understanding, a “supramundane wisdom” that “lies deep hidden in man, beneath its illusive reflections through mundane sensuousness.”<sup>155</sup> When this deeper wisdom is drawn upon, the practitioner can achieve a greater sense of spiritual experience and accomplishment.

According to Lopez, there are also prayers that some Tibetan Buddhists will recite daily in an attempt to teach themselves and become familiar with the various stages which they will encounter after death. One example of this kind of prayer is entitled *Homage to the Lama Manjughosa* by Losang Chogyi Gyaltzen, who lived from 1567 to 1662.<sup>156</sup> In this prayer, the practitioner prays “to be delivered from the frights of this (lifetime), future (lifetimes), and the *bardo*,” while also praying “to remember the instructions of the lama.”<sup>157</sup> The consciousness of the deceased that is in the *bardo* supposedly hears the lama who presides over the death ritual and recitation. The lama’s main job is to convince the person not to fear the images and other projections

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<sup>153</sup> Evans-Wentz, 15.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>156</sup> Lopez, 442, 445.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 445-446.

encountered while in this state. According to David Germano, the lama must make the deceased “self-recognize: to recognize the chaos and seemingly fierce process of change as part of who he or she is, to recognize that the figures looming ahead are his or her own projections as in a dream.”<sup>158</sup> Germano also mentioned the TBD and labeled its teachings as “oral precepts for a practitioner who is dying;” he then called the rite “transference of consciousness techniques.”<sup>159</sup> Although he did not go into any description of what he meant by this label, it appears Germano was referring to the belief that the consciousness of a person is what travels through the *bardo* after death, and the goal of the lama is to guide that consciousness toward liberation and away from attachment to their former lives and the things of this physical world.

## V. Conclusion

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its teachings have become integral to the Tibetan Buddhist’s theology concerning death. The precepts contained within are believed to liberate a deceased person’s consciousness from a cycle of rebirth known as *samsara*. Even though some scholars have noted the heavy emphasis that Tibetans place on death ritual and ceremony, to the Tibetans these teachings are vital in the effort to achieve liberation. The importance of sound and its role in death has also been heavily emphasized by both Tibetan Buddhists and scholars alike. One of the most important parts of the death ritual is the recitation of the TBD text, because the Tibetans believe the deceased’s consciousness lingers near the body for a short time while it experiences a *bardo*. This gap between life and rebirth contains vivid images and experiences that are

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 460-61.

merely projections of one's own mind, but to the deceased these encounters can be overly terrifying and harmful. The hearing of the TBD aids the deceased in his or her journey through this *bardo* in an attempt to lead the consciousness toward a more favorable rebirth, or ultimately to liberation from rebirth entirely.

Some practitioners argue that simply encountering the text while alive is enough to aid one after death, while others claim that a person must devote himself or herself to intense study of the TBD in order to fully grasp its teachings and make it of any use. The question has also been raised as to whether the TBD's teachings are of any value to someone who may never have the opportunity to read the text or hear it recited. These arguments, all a combination of faith, cumulative tradition, and scholarly assertions, are important to the discussion on the impact that the TBD has had on the world. If its teachings are only beneficial to those who take the text and study it religiously, then can the TBD be considered a sacred text outside of Tibetan Buddhism? Also, the images of the *bardo* that are described in the text can all be understood by Buddhist practitioners, but they make little sense to someone not familiar with Eastern images or Buddhist teachings. Does this mean that the text can be of any value to a Western scholar who merely picks up the TBD and begins to read? Most Tibetan Buddhist practitioners would say yes. The text has some special quality that ultimately defines its sacredness. It has the ability to transform the orientation of a person's consciousness by focusing on the sacred teachings contained within. Trungpa states, "Liberation means that whoever comes into contact with this teaching—even in the form of doubt, or with an open mind-

receives a sudden glimpse of enlightenment through the power of the transmission contained in these treasures.”<sup>160</sup>

Sound is instrumental in this entire process. One needs to not only study the text but also hear it recited on a daily basis in order for maximum effectiveness after death. Once the consciousness has entered the *bardo*, the text should be recited into the ear of the deceased’s body in order to guide that person away from fear of the projections and toward a better rebirth or liberation. Some have even argued that the sound of family and friends near the body can have a positive or negative effect on the consciousness depending on the attitude of those involved. Thus, it is important for loved ones to maintain a positive attitude and comfort the consciousness of the deceased even while grieving.

Tibetan Buddhists have taken physical sound, something encountered on a routine basis in everyday life, and have transformed it into something that is sacred. It has become a part of their religion that completely shapes their practices surrounding death. Sound can be manipulated in such a way that a person’s future is determined by the extent to which sound affects his or her consciousness. If Durkheim’s definition is followed, then sound and the TBD both fit into what is sacred. The TBD is not a forbidden text. In fact, Tibetan Buddhists encourage people from all over the world to read and study it. This has led to many scholars and non-scholars alike attempting to decipher its meanings, so one must be careful when researching this topic. The TBD, however, is something set apart as unique that contains a ‘higher’ spiritual teaching which can aid someone on the path toward liberation. This text and the rituals of sound

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<sup>160</sup> Fremantle and Trungpa, viii.

also unite Tibetan Buddhists into a distinctive group, a community or 'church' that allows them to further promulgate their beliefs and practices.



## Conclusion

This paper began by discussing Durkheim's definition of what makes a belief, practice, or object into something sacred. It argues that Tibetan Buddhists have taken sound and have transformed it into a sacred part of their religious tradition. This has been done in especially two instances: chordal chanting and sound ritual surrounding the teachings in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The chordal chanting technique is a fascinating ability of certain Tibetan Buddhist monks that sets them apart as special masters of religious knowledge and ability. It consists of one highly trained Tibetan monk chanting an entire chord all by himself. This technique is forbidden to the majority of not only the world's populations but also to the population of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. This exclusivity exists because chordal chanting has been passed down by a strict chain of oral transmission from male teacher to male student, and this limit to accessibility has helped create a mystique that further fosters the sacredness of this style of chanting. The downside to this, however, is that the practice has also limited scholars who wish to further study and share chordal chanting with the world. Thankfully, there has been some discussion on chordal chanting in scholarly circles, and the field is definitely open to further inquiry and investigation. The key to this is whether a Tibetan Buddhist monk who can chant in this style will ever be willing to fully discuss the details of the practice and its importance within the religion.

Chordal chanting is used by monks in order to further focus the mind on the goal of enlightenment, an escape from suffering while still alive. The chord that is produced

by the technique helps one to tap into a 'higher' plane of consciousness and a 'deeper' level of understanding, because it connects the person to something beyond the normal, or mundane, world. These states are not available to ordinary persons associated with Tibetan Buddhism who are not trained in the entirety of the tradition's spiritual knowledge. The TBD does this as well, because it seeks to propel the consciousness into a higher state of understanding and realization. Therefore, the spiritual authority of these monks is heightened by the simple fact that they can produce a sound that others cannot. One must wonder if a monk's vocal cords or other parts of the body that produce the chord have also become a sacred part of the religious tradition since they are responsible for the sacred chord. The literature has been silent on this question, but it would be worth further investigation by someone who could gain access to the teachers and students of chordal chanting. There is also a need for someone to investigate the absence of women in this ritual, since there is no mention of female chordal chanters in any of the academic literature.

The scholarly literature of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is vastly more available since Tibetan Buddhists are quite clearly very concerned with death and the need for preparation for this moment. Some scholars actually claim that Tibetans are too concerned with death, but the TBD argues that its teachings are essential if one is to achieve liberation from *samsara*. Some practitioners argue that someone merely needs to encounter the text in order for it to be effective once one enters the *bardo* of death, but this is not a widely held theory. Most scholars and Tibetan Buddhists argue that a person must study the text, sit under its instructions in recitation, meditate on its teachings daily,

and also have someone recite the text over the body after death. All of these factors ultimately work together to influence the consciousness in such a way that it should ignore fearsome projections and head toward liberation or a higher rebirth.

The words contained within the text of the TBD hold some sort of sacred power according to Tibetan Buddhists. These words themselves have the innate ability to lead a consciousness to liberation. The question has been raised, however, of whether the text can benefit someone who is not initiated into the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, because the teachings concerning what one encounters in the *bardo* make little sense to the uninitiated. A possible remedy for this problem has been discussed by some practitioners, namely that the descriptions in the TBD naturally only make sense to Tibetan Buddhists, but the projections of the mind will be specific to the consciousness of the person traveling through the *bardo*. Basically, someone from Europe will experience things in the *bardo* relative to what he or she knows from daily life. Since the important thing is that one merely hears the text's teachings, there is not as much emphasis as there should be on this discussion.

Another area where Tibetan Buddhists place a great deal of emphasis on sound is within the chanting of mantras. This aspect of Tibetan Buddhism is not discussed very much in this paper, but it is worth noting the belief that certain mantras, and especially certain sounds, have the ability to liberate a person from *samsara*. This can be compared with the belief in Hinduism in the power of the syllable *om*, or *aum*, that has the ability to enhance one's spiritual experience when chanted correctly. At the root of these beliefs is the desire to escape the suffering of this world and the cycle of rebirth, just like in the

rituals concerning death in the TBD. Sound is exalted so much that it is critical for a practitioner to understand how to use it in such a way that aids the religious experience. These chants and declarations each serve a purpose, and that purpose is to further one on the path toward liberation and enlightenment.

Sound is a sacred force within Tibetan Buddhism. Practitioners allow themselves to be used as vehicles for this sacred sound in order to further their religious knowledge, understanding, and experience. In most cases, sound is integral to the attainment of enlightenment or liberation, goals that seek to release one from the suffering of this world for the perfection of a higher spiritual plane. Despite the exclusivity of some Tibetan Buddhist practices, scholars have begun to delve into this fascinating subject, and hopefully this paper has shed some light on the importance of sound within Tibetan Buddhism.

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