Liberation through sensory encounters in Tibetan Buddhist practice

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Scholars of religion have readily acknowledged for some time the importance of physical, sensory encounters with specialized objects in shaping religious subjectivities and beliefs.[1] Yet scholars of Buddhist traditions have been relatively slow to recognize how Buddhists positively enlist the body and senses in daily approaches to religious practice. Consequently, the stereotype that Buddhist traditions are exclusively focused on the mind and its cultivation, and therefore neglect and even reject rich attention to sensory life and embodied experience continues to circulate.[2]

This paper is an attempt to bring greater awareness to the roles of the senses in Buddhist traditions by presenting as a limit case a set of popular Tibetan Buddhist sense-based practices systematized by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) in his short text entitled, *An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Saṃboghakāya Tamer of Beings,* (*Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba bcu gcig gi lag len gsel byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*).[3] This text—based on revelations of the visionary master mChog gyur bde chen gling pa (1829–1870) that are still widely practiced today in Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and the rest of the Tibetan Buddhist world—features eleven different modes of sensory and cognitive contact with especially potent objects as the primary point of departure for personal—and collective—transformation.

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1 Compelling examples in the study of Christianity include the classics, Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978) and Peter Brown, *Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Christianity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981); and, more recently, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, Zone Books, 2011).

2 For insightful analyses of the influence of this "Protestant" tendency in the history of Buddhist Studies, see Almond 1988 and Trainor 1997.

3 This texts provenance and extant versions will be discussed below.

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Analysis of this text will briefly touch on the pedigree of sensory practices in Indian Buddhist traditions and the history of their reception and systematization in Tibet, before presenting how the material and ritual specifications of each technique relates sensory experience to cognition, language, and action to bring about a range of effects. The broader goal of this exercise is to help remedy lingering perceptions of Buddhist traditions as fundamentally world abnegating, and therefore neglectful or dismissive of rich attention to sensory experiences and other physical interactions with sacra. Kong sprul's writing and the revelatory tradition of which it partakes powerfully illustrates that some contemporary Buddhist traditions not only acknowledge the senses as a potent fulcrum for spiritual growth, but sometimes even focus on the senses and performative sensory interactions with specialized objects as the primary medium through which to refine the sensibilities of practitioners and experiencers. This paper further suggests that these practices are best understood in the context of the history and transmission of Buddhist traditions in India, and Tibet. It attempts to illustrate that the practices outlined in this 19th century Tibetan text are neither purely a Tibetan innovation, nor entirely unique to tantric practice, but represent instead the final stage of a centuries-long process of systematizing sensory practices that originated and first became widespread in mainstream Indian Mahāyāna circles, and before.

1. Introduction

It is perhaps a truism that the senses "mediate the relationship between self and society, mind and body, idea and object."[4] It thus stands to reason that sensory contact and perception would serve as an explicit focal point in Buddhist contemplative practices and philosophical reflections. Indeed, the strong emphasis that Buddhist traditions have placed on the mind and its transformation as key for spiritual progress has never curtailed the circulation of practices that utilize, or even feature, sensory experiences with powerful objects, alone or in combination, as methods to hasten spiritual growth.[5] The mind, for that matter, has often been understood by Buddhist theorists as a "sensory organ" in its own right—not in opposition to the other sensory organs, but as an additional faculty that takes the other sensory perceptions as its objects, prior to the introduction of

[4] Bull, Gilroy, Howes, and Kahn 2006: 6.

[5] These include not only relics, *stūpa*s, statues, icons, and temples, but any other object believed to have been used or in contact with Buddha Śākyamuni and other buddhas, bodhisattvas, disciples, and saints. For a glimpse into the wide range of cult objects venerated in ancient Buddhist India, see Faxian 2002.

interpretive concepts. It has been remarked that the space where percepts and non-conceptual mind meet and the dynamics involved in this encounter is undertheorized in Buddhist philosophical treatises.[6]

Equally undertheorized by Buddhist thinkers is the aporia of how, precisely, given the primacy of mind and the proposed Mahāyāna goal of realizing the sameness of all phenomena in emptiness qua dependent origination, sensory encounters with particularly potent sensory and material objects have emerged at the very core of Buddhist communal formations in India and wherever else Buddhism has spread and taken root. Relics, reliquaries, statues, icons, amulets, and anything else that resembles or was believed to be have been in contact with a past master, buddha, or bodhisattva—in addition to scriptural books, or the diagrams, formulas, and mantras spelled out in them—have all played pivotal roles in the expansion and institutionalization of Buddhist traditions across Asia.[7]

Numerous *sūtra*s and *tantra*s detail the benefits acquired through seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, or having some other sensory contact with these kinds of objects.[8] Such beneficial outcomes often run the gamut between healing, protection against natural or manmade calamities, longevity, conception and childbirth, increase of wealth and power, or some other pragmatic effect; through to the prevention of rebirth in the three lower realms as hell denizens, animals, or anguished spirits, or some other mode of karmic purification; all the way up to heightened meditative experience, manifestation of awakened qualities, and liberation from *saṃsāra* as a whole.

There are multiple ways in which Buddhist scriptural sources, taken as a whole, construe the efficacy of these sensory encounters with powerful objects. This makes the issue of efficacy open to interpretation—and contestation. In some sources, the devotion of the experiencer is the prime mover and the object need not have any intrinsic power whatsoever to become a cult object and, through faith alone, a worthy object of further veneration. We might provisionally term this type of object the "dog's tooth" variety, after the famous Tibetan story of how an ordinary dog's tooth, given by a neglectful son

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6 Dreyfus 1997: 560n14.

7 Examples are numerous. Notable studies of the importance of sacred objects in South Asian and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions include Mus 1935, Dallapicccola and Zingel-Avé Lallemant 1980, Tambiah 1984, Schopen 1987, Boucher 1991, Trainor 1997, and Strong 2004.

8 Instances of this phenomenon are too numerous to cite. A browse through the many translations being published by *84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha* (http://read.84000.co/) yields several examples.

to his devout old mother under the pretext of being the Buddha's tooth, nonetheless yielded its own actual relics after the mother venerated it with devotion.[9]

On the opposite extreme are other sources, which key the object as so intrinsically powerful that any interaction with it whatsoever, even if utterly unintentional, can bring a range of pragmatic and transcendent effects. We might provisionally refer to this type of object as the "chased pig" variety, after another famous Tibetan narrative, in which a pig is unwittingly chased by a dog around a *stūpa* so potent that "the seed of enlightenment was sown in both of them."[10]

Yet other sources—the majority, in fact—are situated somewhere between these ideal-typical poles, or reflect aspects of both. These frame encounters with such objects as potent *conditions* for transformation, which bring variegated effects in tandem with the subjectivities and actions of those who produce and interact with them. These mitigating circumstances are variously explained in terms of the level of realization of the person who created or manifested the object (i.e., whether it was a buddha, or bodhisattva, what level of spiritual realization the bodhisattva had attained, etc.), the previous or subsequent training of the experiencer (i.e., an advanced yogin, or an "ordinary person"), the subjective state in which the object is experienced (i.e., with strong devotion, or not), the subjective qualities of the ritual officiants who prepared the object (i.e., possessing "experience and realization," or not), whether or not the proper ritual protocol was followed in its preparation, and so on.[11] In such instances, the intentionality of the beings interacting with the object are a key factor. Scriptural sources, moreover, are often not uniform in their approach. Sometimes a *sūtra* or *tantra* will concede that a sensory encounter can grant all manner of positive effects only to conclude with the deflating caveat: "barring the ripening of previous karma" (Skt. *sthāpayitvā paurāṇaṃ karmavipākaṃ*, Tib. *sngon gyi las kyi rnam par smin pa ma gtogs*).

The kind of substance that perhaps best illustrates the tensions between these approaches in Tibet is "Treasure substance" (*gter rdzas*). In the 11th and 12th centuries, as Tibetans were systematizing Indian Buddhist scriptural traditions to form uniquely Tibetan lineages and institutions, visionary masters, otherwise known as Treasure revealers (*gter ston*), began to unearth revelations with a demonstrably material

9 Patrul 2011: 173–174.

10 Ibid., 188 and 239.

11 For a rich example of how one 16th to 17th century Tibetan master theorized about these mitigating factors, see Gentry 2017: 273–274.

and sensory focus.[12] These "Treasure substances," as they are called, include a range of potent materials which the rNying ma tradition (and, to a lesser extent, the Bon and bKa' brgyud traditions) maintains were concealed by the 8th to 9th century Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and others throughout the Tibetan landscape for later destined Treasure revealers to retrieve and implement anew when the time for their peak efficacy is reached.[13] These items—typically excavated along with Treasure teachings that explain their histories, benefits, and modes of preparation—can include statues, relics, clothing, ritual objects, gems, medicines, and even entire valleys or lands. These substances are also often presented as including the fluids, flesh, bone, hair, nails, clothes, or handiwork of Padmasambhava and other awakened buddhas and bodhisattvas from the past. In this they are presumed to have their own intrinsic powers to impact beings and environments. Human ritual treatment, however, is typically still required to activate, or channel the power of these items toward specific aims. Other objects are not revealed, strictly speaking, but manufactured based on directives decoded from Treasure teachings, using ingredients that are only sometimes construed to possess their own intrinsic powers; the power of such objects tends to be more fundamentally rooted in their subsequent ritual treatment.

Regardless of its source, once the power of these objects is augmented and unleashed by ritual mediation, it is most often expressed in narratives and liturgies in terms of newly acquired properties of animation that confound the senses. Treasure substances and objects are depicted as multiplying, boiling, wafting fragrance, emitting lights, or sounds, flying, producing dreams and visionary encounters with deities, masters, and buddhas, and other outcomes that typically astound and inspire audiences and participants.[14]

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[12] Although this refers to Treasure substances in particular, and not to the texts that these typically accompany, the rationale of the Treasure tradition as a whole can be characterized in terms of an emphasis on materiality, a distributed sense of agency, and the pronounced presence of political overtones. See Gentry 2017: 46–68.

[13] This constitutes the general scenario for most Treasures. However, the rNying ma school also includes among its ranks other Treasure concealers, such as Srong btsan sgam po (fl. 7th c.) Vimalamitra (fl. 8th c.), Ye shes mtsho rgyal (fl. 8th and 9th c.), and prince Mu tri bTsan po (fl. 8th and 9th c.), among others. See Gyatso 1993: 98n2. Moreover, Treasures are not just the preserve of the rNying ma school. They also feature among the authoritative teachings of other schools, including Bon (Ibid.). For a detailed traditional account of the rNying ma school's Treasure tradition, see Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1986.

[14] Gentry 2017: 56–133.

Liturgies are often explicit that such events are telltale signs of the success of ritual performances focused on these items.[15]

By the fourteenth century many of these objects came to be categorized according to a four-fold typology, in which the mode of contact or efficacy was used to refer to the objects themselves. We thus encounter objects such as 1) miniature statues, *stūpa*s, or other images said to be crafted by the hands of past masters, as well as special *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas, that promise "liberation through seeing;" 2) a range of *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* textual formulas and instruction manuals that promise "liberation through hearing;" 3) instruction manuals, circular diagrams (*yantra*), *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas that prescribe their manufacture into powerful amulets that can confer "liberation through wearing;" 4) especially potent pills made of the relics of past buddhas and masters, and other materials that can grant "liberation through tasting." Included in one or another of these categories is also a number of other items, such as ritual daggers, hats, vases, water, gems, garments, masks, and so forth, that similarly promise "liberation" to whomever comes into physical, sensory contact with them.[16]

The rNying ma school has sometimes promoted the idea that interactions with these kinds of objects are special techniques belonging to their Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) tradition that can grant "buddhahood without meditation" (*ma bsgoms sangs rgyas*). There has also been a pronounced tendency to concentrate these media into a single item, and to distribute their efficacy to other persons, places, or things. It has become commonplace to encounter special objects, instructions, persons, and locations said to have the capacity to liberate through all four modes; these are said to be "endowed with the four modes of liberation" (*grol ba bzhi ldan*). In such instances, liberation through "wearing" and "tasting" are sometimes replaced with liberation through "touching" and "recollecting," apropos of the type of object involved (i.e., whether it is something that can be "worn," or "tasted"). Great Perfection literature tends to describe a person endowed with all four liberations—that is, someone with whom any kind of sensory contact brings others spiritual progress—as having the capacity to provide the highest form of beneficial action in the world. Theoretically, this capacity is achievable only by sublime beings who have perfected themselves for the welfare of others.

The fourteenth century was also witness to what may have been the first public critiques among Tibetans of the claim that encounters with

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15 Ibid.: 292–375.

16 For more details about these categories, along with studies of specific examples, see Gayley 2007; Gentry 2017; and Turpeinen in the present issue.

special objects are so potent that they can bring "liberation."[17] These criticisms came from prestigious Buddhist hierarchs, who seemed to have seen in such a claim a gross exaggeration of the potency of objects described in scriptural sources, at the expense of the mind and efforts put toward its purification. These early criticisms resurfaced with greater force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, compelling rNying ma exegetes to provide more robust doctrinal justifications for their efficacy.[18]

As a testament to the success of these rNying ma rebuttals, persons, places, and things claimed to liberate upon sensory contact became popular throughout Tibetan religious culture, and the kinds of objects purported to possess such powers continued to proliferate. For instance, the monasteries and institutions of other sectarian groups, such as the Sa skya school's Zhwa lu monastery, among several other examples, gained considerable fame for their possession of relics, reliquaries, texts, or other objects similarly construed as items that could purify immeasurable negative karma and sometimes even bring liberation, simply through sensory contact.[19] We also begin to encounter an expansion of the "four liberations" to a rubric of six modes of liberation (*grol ba drug*), in which "touching" (*reg pa*) and "sensing/smelling" (*tshor ba*), or sometimes "recollecting" (*dran pa*), are added to the previous set of four: seeing, hearing, tasting, and wearing. Prevalent also was an enumeration of eight means of "liberation," in which "wearing" appears first, followed in turn by liberation through "seeing," "hearing," "touching," "tasting," "recollecting," "understanding," and "sensing."[20] 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas's 19th century typology of eleven modes of liberation, to which we turn next, seems to be a unique expansion of this rubric to include an even wider range of media through which to connect with particularly powerful objects.

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17 There may have been earlier critiques, but the earliest instances recorded by the famous rNying ma apologist Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624) are a third-person account of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa's (1357–1419) rejection at sNe gdong rtse of "liberation through wearing" amulets and "liberation through tasting" pills (*Lung rigs 'brug sgra*: 126.5–.6), and 'Bri gung dpal 'dzin's (c. 14th century) terse dismissal of "liberation through hearing" instructions and "liberation through wearing" amulets in his broadside against the rNying ma school (*Nges don 'brug sgra*: 317.4–319.5).

18 Gentry 2017: 171–290.

19 Skal bzang and rGyal po 1987: 34–42. For more on this aspect of Zhwa lu monastery's institution prestige, see Wood 2012.

20 Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med 1975: 176.3–.4.

2. 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's 'Eleven Liberations'

Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas's exposition on eleven modes of liberation details eleven different ritual methods, each of which prescribes the construction and/or ritual preparation of a potent sensory or cognitive object that promises to directly or indirectly bring liberation and other benefits to whomever makes contact with it. This text's enumeration of eleven such methods—the most extensive rubric of its kind in Tibet—is certainly not arbitrary. The full title of Kong sprul's writing—*An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Saṃboghakāya Tamer of Beings, from 'Dispeller of All Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]'*[21]—illustrates that it was composed specifically to elucidate these practices as they relate to a cycle of revelations known as *Dispeller of All Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]* (*Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel*), revealed by his associate the Treasure revealer mChog gyur bde chen gling pa sometime between 1858 and 1867.[22] Kong sprul's text is therefore included in the various editions of the *mChog gling gter gsar*, the compilation of mChog gyur gling pa's revelations. And although its location in these editions varies slightly, it invariably appears paired with another text authored by Kong sprul[23]—*A Chariot for Benefitting Others: The Activity, Initiation, and [the Rite of] the Tie to the Higher Realms of the Saṃbhogakāya Guru, Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*.[24] This liturgy centers on a *maṇḍala* of eleven deities:

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21 *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba gcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*. The bibliographic locations of this text will be outlined just below.

22 Kong sprul, *gTer ston lo rgyus*, 650.5–651.3. For more on the life and revelations of mChog gyur gling pa, see Togyal 1988 and Doctor 2005.

23 It appears in all extant *mChog gling gter gsar* collections with the following title page: */Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba gcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho.* Its location in the different editions is as follows: *gTer chos/ mChog gyur gling pa*, 32 v., vol. 3 (*Ga*), 27 ff. (New Delhi: Patshang Lama Sonam Gyaltsen, 1975–1980), 577–629; *mChog gling gter gsar*, 39 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 20 ff. (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Pema Tashi, 1982–1986), 253–291; *mChog gling bde chen zhig po gling pa yi zab gter yid bzhin nor bu'i mdzod chen po*, 40 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 22 ff. (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ka-nying Shedrup Ling Monastery, 2004?), 263–305. This presentation and analysis of this text is the result of comparison of these versions, in consultation with the versions located in the various *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* collections (see the following note for their locations). Page and folio numbers of all passages referenced in this article are according to the Ka-nying Shedrup Ling edition (2004?).

24 *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun gsal las/ Bla ma longs sku 'gro 'dul ngan song dong sprugs kyi phrin las dbang bskur gnas lung dang bcas pa gzhan phan shing rta*. Its location in the different editions is as follows: *gTer chos/ mChog gyur gling pa*, 32 v., vol. 3 (*Ga*), 39 ff. New Delhi: Patshang Lama Sonam Gyaltsen, 1975–1980), 500–576; *mChog gling gter gsar*, 39 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 31 ff. (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Pema Tashi, 1982–1986), 191–

Akṣobhya is the main deity in central position; Vajrasattva is situated on Akṣobhya's crown; and Avalokiteśvara is to Akṣobhya's front. Surrounding them, situated on an eight-petal lotus, are Vairocana in the east; Ratnasambhava-Śākyamuni in the south; Amithābha in the west; Amoghasiddhi in the north; Khasarpaṇi Avalokiteśvara (Sem nyid ngal gso) in the southeast; Amoghapāśa, another form of Avalokiteśvara, in the southwest[25]; Padmoṣṇīṣa in the northwest; and Vajrasāra in the northeast.

It happens that each of the eleven liberations in *An Astonishing Ocean*, as I shall henceforth call Kong sprul's eleven-fold manual, centers on one or another of these deities as the focal point of its associated liturgical practice. More specifically, each practice involves the visualization and/or artistic rendering of the entire eleven-deity *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*'Gro 'dul 'khor ba dong sprugs*), but the deity governing each technique of liberation shifts to central position in turn. In this way, Kong sprul's explication of eleven techniques of liberation integrates a diverse range of sensory practices into the liturgical framework centering on this *maṇḍala*.

The purported effect of this liturgy to "churn the depths of *saṃsāra*" illustrates that the goal of these practices is resolutely soteriological in scope—their ultimate aim is nothing short of complete liberation from *saṃsāra*. However, as has been observed with much tantric Buddhist practice,[26] *An Astonishing Ocean* does not eschew pragmatic goals, but absorbs and integrates them into an overarching soteriological framework, in which the term "liberation" is clearly intended to index a hierarchy of possible effects: liberation from adverse circumstances in this life, liberation from negative karmic consequences in the next, liberation from rebirth in *saṃsāra*, and possibly others, nestled in between.[27]

This dynamic is evidently at work even in this text's bibliographic position within Kong sprul's compendium of Treasure teachings known as the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, where the text also appears, in addition to its inclusion in the *mChog gling gter gsar* cycle. *An Astonishing Ocean* is categorized in the different editions of the *Rin chen*

252; *mChog gling bde chen zhig po gling pa yi zab gter yid bzhin nor bu'i mdzod chen po*, 40 v., vol. 2 (*Kha*), 36 ff. (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ka-nying Shedrup Ling Monastery, 2004?), 191–262.

25 For a discussion of texts found in the Dunhuang caves that feature Amoghapāśa, see van Schaik 2006.

26 Samuel 1993: 27.

27 For more on this adumbration and hierarchical merging of the scope of liberatory effects promised through such sensory encounters, see Gentry 2017: 241–244 and 266–267.

gter mdzod chen mo under the category "sublime activities" (*mchog gi phrin las*). This is a relatively short section, but it heads the wider category of "extensive collection of specific rituals" (*bye brag las kyi tshogs rab 'byams*), which also includes the full range of pragmatically-oriented Treasure liturgies that appear in the sub-section "common activities" (*thun mong gi phrin las*), immediately following "sublime activities."[28] In this way, Kong sprul categorizes *An Astonishing Ocean* in his *Rin chen gter mdzod* collection alongside other texts that detail practices of liberation through sensory encounters with potent objects, framing it and its associated "sublime activities" liturgies as the crowning soteriological variants of sets of material religious practices whose aims are more pragmatic in scope.[29] As will be illustrated below, this pattern applies to each of the eleven techniques as well.

Before turning to Kong sprul's liturgy, it is important to note that the appellation of the *maṇḍala* and practice cycle to which this liturgy is attached, *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*, indicates that mChog gyur gling pa's revelation is intimately connection to another much earlier Treasure cycle: *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*'Khor ba dong sprugs*), revealed by the famous 13th century Treasure revealer Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–1270).[30] At certain points in Kong sprul's liturgy he draws directly from Guru Chos dbang's revelation, the *tantra* of *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*),[31] thus implicitly acknowledging that mChog gyur gling pa's similarly-titled revelatory cycle might have drawn inspiration, or perhaps even textual material, from Guru chos dbang's earlier revelation.[32] Analysis of the parallels between these two cycles lies outside the scope of the present paper; I will nonetheless attempt to note instances where Kong sprul makes such connections explicit in his liturgy.

Moving on to the content of Kong sprul's text itself, after a brief homage and a general explanation of the subject matter, the text outlines its governing structure: eleven sections detailing eleven methods of liberation. They are as follows:

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28 *Rin chen gter mdzod* 1976–1980, vol. 67 (*Ni*) : 303–341; *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* 199?, vol. 42 (*Ni*): 453–492.

29 For more on Kong sprul's compilation of the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, see Schwieger 2010. For a catalogue of the *mTshur phu* version of this collection and translations of the colophons of its texts, see Schwieger and Everding 1990–2009.

30 Kong sprul, *gTer ston lo rgyus*, 399.1.

31 Gu ru Chos dbang 1976–1980.

32 Robert Mayer's insightful application of the notions of the tradent and textual modularity to the dynamic of Treasure revelation in Tibet comes to mind in this regard; see Mayer 2015.

1. liberation through seeing a *mudrā*
2. liberation through hearing a mantra
3. liberation through tasting
4. liberation through touching sand
5. liberation through recollecting a *stūpa*
6. liberation through cultivating
7. liberation through drinking from a stream
8. liberation through wearing a *dhāraṇī*
9. liberation through training in *poṣadha*
10. liberation through smelling incense
11. liberation through making offerings[33]

Before delving into each of these topics, a few general observations may help orient our foray into this text and the practices it presents. Firstly, not only does the enumeration of eleven liberations correspond with the number of deities in the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṁsāra*, as explained above—so does its sequence. Reviewing the subject heading of each section as these are elaborated in the body of the text immediately reveals that the order of liberations reflects the order of deities in the *maṇḍala*, such that Akṣobhya features in "liberation through seeing," Vajrasattva, in "liberation through hearing," Avalokiteśvara, in "liberation through tasting," on down the list to Vajrasāra, in "liberation through making offerings."

Moreover, at a glance it is immediately apparent that this list includes not only modes of liberation through the basic five sensory experiences of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling particularly potent sensory objects. It also includes modes of liberation through the mental operations of recollecting, cultivating, and training. In this it is helpful to recall that the mind is typically construed in Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal contexts drawn from India as a sensory organ in its own right. But the inclusion of cognitive practices here nonetheless elicits questions: How are these mental exercises any different from standard Buddhist meditation practices, which typically emphasize mind and its cultivation in gaining freedom from the fetters of attachment to sensory objects? Why, for that matter, are these packaged alongside the practices of liberation through sensory encounters? And what is the role of sensory encounters with potent objects in these seemingly mind-centric practices?

We can also readily see in this list that there are a few other manners

[33] Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 265.2–.4: *phyag rgya mthong grol sngags thos grol/ /myang grol bye ma reg grol/ /mchod rten dran grol zhing sgom grol/ /'babs chu 'thung grol gzungs btags grol/ /gso sbyong bslab grol/ /spos tshor grol/ /mchod sbyin spyad pas grol rnams so/*

of liberation that stipulate sensory experience, but feature modes of sensory contact specific to certain types of objects. For instance, there is liberation through "wearing," as distinct from touching; liberation through "drinking," as distinct from tasting; and liberation through "making offerings," as distinct from any specific sensory medium. In these instances, the premium seems to be placed on the objects themselves, or on the actions by which one interacts with them, rather than on the sensory medium through which they are accessed, or on the mind and its cultivation. What role in these practices, we might wonder, do the senses themselves play in gaining liberation through encountering such objects? And what is the role of the mind and its cultivation, both in these practices, and in those that more centrally feature encounters through the five primary senses?

Immediately after this list, moreover, the would-be ritualist is told that to perform the four practices of liberation through tasting, liberation through seeing, liberation through recollecting, and liberation through wearing requires the liturgical framework of the associated rite of *Saṃbhogakāya Tamer of Beings* (*Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi cho ga*), which is explained separately.[34] What does the embeddedness of these techniques in liturgical performances say more general about the role of human-object interactions in securing their efficacy? To address these and related questions an account of the eleven practices is in order.

2.a. Liberation through seeing

First in the sequence of eleven modes of liberation is "liberation through seeing." More specifically, the section heading describes this practice as "liberation through seeing the *mudrā* of Akṣobhya."[35] The section opens with instructions to build a *bodhi stūpa*, well-proportioned and of whatever size one can afford, and to place in a portico on its "vase"—its bulbous body—a statue (*sku*) of Akṣobhya, replete with all the iconographic features described in the generation-stage visualization liturgy (Tib. *mngon rtogs,* Skt. *abhisamaya*) of the associated *Saṃbhogakāya Tamer of Beings*.[36] This is followed by instructions to write on its pedestals the *dhāraṇī* of *Las sgrib rnam sbyong*—the Tibetan translation and transliteration of the *Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī-nāma-dhāraṅī*[37]—either once, or as many times as will fit, followed by this petition (*'dod gsol*):

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[34] Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 265.4–266.1.

[35] Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 266.1: *mi 'khrugs pa'i phyag rgya mthong grol*

[36] Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–.4.

[37] *Las kyi sgrib pa thams cad rnam par sbyong ba zhes bya ba'i gzungs* (*Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī-nāma-dhāraṅī*), Tōh. 743, 2006–2009.

> May all beings who see this supreme receptacle be absolved of their evil deeds, obscurations, faults, and downfalls, have the doorway of rebirth into *saṃsāra* and the lower realms closed off, and be caused to easily attain the state of liberation and unexcelled awakening.[38]

The procedural explanation then states that it would be most excellent to fill the statue and the *stūpa*, including its life-pillar (*srog shing*) and other architectural features, with as many copies of the *dhāraṇī* and petition as will fit.[39] However, it adds, if a three-dimensional *stūpa* cannot be built, it is also permissible to draw the *stūpa*, Akṣobhya image, and *dhāraṇī* and petition on paper.[40]

The practitioner is then to perform unspecified purification, ablution, and consecration rites, before embarking on the main practice that centers on the *stūpa*—the liturgy.[41] Here, astrological specifications figure in; the liturgy is to be performed every day, ideally for four separate sessions a day, only between the first and fifteenth days of the "month of miracles" (*cho 'phrul zla ba*), the first month of the Tibetan year, during which, it is believed, Buddha Śākyamuni performed particularly impactful miracles.[42]

The liturgy follows the basic pattern of a consecration ritual, drawing specifically from the other associated liturgical text authored by Kong sprul mentioned above, *A Chariot for Benefitting Others*.[43] The procedure outlined in this other liturgy calls for the ritualist to visualize (*bsgoms*) him or herself as Avalokiteśvara and, while reciting his six-syllable mantra and invoking Akṣobhya through visualizing the radiation and absorption of light rays, to imagine that Akṣobhya infuses the image of Akṣobhya on the *stūpa* with his awakened presence.

The performance proceeds as follows: one imagines that the *stūpa* and statue first dissolve into emptiness. Out of emptiness emerges a celestial palace, adorned at its center with an eight-petal, multicolor lotus, at the center of which rests an elephant-supported jewel throne, crowned with a lotus and moon seat supporting the syllable *hūṁ*. The syllable then transforms into Buddha Akṣobhya, deep blue in

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38 Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 266.2–.3: *rten mchog 'di gang gis mthong ba'i sems can thams cad kyi sdig sgrib nyes ltung zhi zhing 'khor ba dang ngan song gi skye sgo chod nas thar pa byang chub bla na med pa'i go 'phang bde blag tu thob par mdzad du gsol/*

39 Ibid., 266.3-.4.

40 Ibid., 266.4–.5.

41 Ibid., 266.5.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 266.5–267.1. Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–200.1. For comparison with standard *stūpa* consecration rites performed by Buddhists in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

complexion, holding a vajra, seated cross-legged, and bedecked with silk and jewel ornaments. After inviting the actual Akṣobhya to enter this imagined form, coterminous with the *stūpa*, and sealing his presence there, the ritualist is to perform an elaborate offering and praise.[44]

Then ensues the main part of the liturgy: the ritualist is to recite the *dhāraṇī mantra* of Akṣobhya—the same one written on and enclosed within the *stūpa*—without break, while one-pointedly imagining that light radiates from the heart of oneself, as Avalokiteśvara, invoking the awakened mindstream of Akṣobhya. This causes light to radiate forth from the center of Akṣobhya's forehead, flooding the ten directions. The light purifies the karma and obscurations of all beings throughout the three realms, and invokes the compassion and aspirations of the noble ones. Then all their wisdom, awakened qualities, and blessings dissolve back into his heart, causing him to radiate with increasing intensity. Each session concludes with a brief offering and praise, capped with a petition of the desired aim, confession, long-life supplication, aspirations, and auspicious verses.[45]

Signs of the rite's success are presented next. These include the occurrence during ritual proceedings of unexpected sensory experiences, such as unusual lights, smells, and sounds.[46] At the conclusion of the fifteen days of continuous practice, observing four sessions a day, the ritualist is to perform an elaborate offering, praise, and long-life ceremony, and to toss grain while reciting the *pratītyasamutpāda mantra* a hundred times.[47]

Once the *stūpa* has been sufficiently prepared, it is to be installed somewhere others can easily see it. If such a receptacle (*rten*), as the text stipulates, "for performing, as extensively as possible, aspirations, and the like," is three-dimensional (*'bur ma*), it should be placed in an enclosure (*bzhugs khang*). Whereas if it is drawn (*bris pa*) or printed (*spar ma*), it should be attached to the surface of a board and posted prominently, protected from the elements, at a busy thoroughfare where everyone can see it.[48] Wherever it is placed, the ritual officiant should politely request that it remain there (*bzhugs su bsol*); once thus consecrated through ritual proceedings and placed in the appropriate location, it is now ready to be treated like an especially venerable person.

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44 Kong sprul, *gZhan phan shing rta*, 198.1–.5.
45 Kong sprul, *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 267.1–.4.
46 Ibid., 267.5–.6.
47 Ibid., 267.6.
48 Ibid., 267.6–268.2.

The section of "liberation through seeing" concludes by citing its benefits (*phan yon*):

> If even just seeing this
> Grants freedom from the abodes of bad migrations,
> What need is there to mention that those with faith and *bodhicitta*
> Will traverse the path of the nobles ones [through seeing it]![49]

Benefits are thus promised to unfold on two levels, according to two different types of audience. Seeing it ensures freedom from negative rebirths for ordinary beings without spiritual training, but it hastens advanced spiritual refinement for the faithful with the compassionate resolve to awaken all beings. This adumbration of different benefits from sensory encounters with the *stūpa*, depending on the diverse needs and levels of spiritual refinement of those experiencing it, is a pattern that recurs for several of the eleven techniques.

2.b. Liberation through hearing

Although "liberation through hearing" follows "liberation through seeing" in the sequence of eleven methods listed in the table of contents, when we reach this section of the text we are told summarily that in this context liberation through hearing pertains exclusively to "liberation through reading aloud the secret mantra of Vajrasattva, which is according to the manner of recitation and meditation found only in the speech of the Omniscient One mKhyen brtse rin po che."[50] This practice in all likelihood refers to *Liberation through Hearing the Secret Mantra of Vajrasattva, from the Dispeller of Obstacles, Accomplishing the Mind [of the Guru]*, composed by Kong sprul's associate and teacher, 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), and included in the *Rin che gter mdzod* collection; in one edition it appears just two texts before *An Awesome Ocean* in the same section.[51] *An Awesome Ocean*

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[49] Ibid., 268.2: *'di ni mthong ba tsam gyis kyang: ngan song gnas las thar 'gyur na: dad dang byang ldan pa rnams: 'phags lam 'gro bas mos ci dgos:*

[50] Ibid., 268.3: *rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang sngags bklags pas grol ba 'don sgom gyi tshul ni kun gzigs mkhyen brtse'i rin po che'i gsung rab las 'byung ba de kho nyid do/*

[51] *Bla ma'i thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel las/ rigs bdag rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang sngags thos pas grol ba*, In *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, 111 vol., vol. 67 (*Ni*) (Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), 289–302. Kong sprul, in his "catalogue" to the collection, calls this text *Thugs sgrub bar chad kun sel gyi rdor sems bklag grol* (79.1). It is thus "liberation through reciting" here, rather than "liberation through hearing," although these two modalities are obviously interrelated. Kong sprul and mKhyen brtse'i dbang po were both instrumental in the revelation and transmission of mChog gyur gling pa's extensive revelatory output. For more on the role of the relationship between these three figures in mChog gyur gling pa's revelations, see Tobgyal 1988. For details about the relationship between these three figures in the

provides nothing else aside from this cursory reference.

However, when perusing mKhyen brtse'i dbang po's liturgy it becomes apparent that this practice embeds Vajrasattva meditation and recitation practice, otherwise a standard part of all tantric preliminary practices,[52] in the specific setting of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*. In so doing, the Vajrasattva mantra takes on extraordinary powers, well beyond those typically outlined in the standard renditions of the practice. This amplification of effects becomes readily apparent when the liturgy cites Padmasambhava to extol the benefits from hearing it:

> From even just hearing the sound,
> On the wind, from the direction of the mantra's recitation,
> All the negative destinies and the sufferings of *saṃsāra* will be quelled.
> Whereas even having a mere moment of faith and confidence in it
> Will sow the seed of liberation.[53]

Once again, as with the practice of liberation through seeing, the effects of hearing the mantra can impact one's suffering in this life, the destinations of one's future lives, and final liberation, depending on the attitude and intentionality of the hearer.

2.c. Liberation through tasting

In the third member in the mandalic sequence we encounter "liberation through tasting," specifically, "liberation through tasting of Karmasattva that churns *saṃsāra* from the depths" (*las kyi sems dpa' 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi myang grol*).[54] This instruction begins with a general injunction to follow the structural framework of a detailed group accomplishment rite, according to the general procedure, if there is preference for such an elaborate ceremony. Without further ado, the text then proceeds to give instructions for how to prepare the "liberation through tasting" pills when there are only a few practitioners, and few resources at hand.[55]

The material preparations for the rite are stipulated first: ritual

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so-called *Ris med* movement of eastern Tibet, see Smith 2001: 235–272; and Gardner 2006.

[52] For a standard rendition of this practice as performed in tantric preliminary practices, see Patrul 2011: 263–280.

[53] 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, *Rigs bdag rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang sngags thos pas grol ba*, 294.5: *sngags bzlas pa'i phyogs rlung gi sgra: thos pas kyang ni ngan song dang: 'khor ba'i sdug bsngal thams cad zhi: dad dang nges shes skad cig tsam: skyes kyang thar pa'i sa bon thebs:*

[54] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 268.3–.4.

[55] Ibid., 268.4.

officiants are to take as their basis the physical relics (*gdung ring bsrel*) of past buddhas, bodhisattvas, or siddhas, and, primarily, the flesh of one born seven times a Brahmin (*skye bdun gyi sku sha*), which has been revealed in Treasure (*gter byon*) or is otherwise renowned in Tibet.[56] As a protective medium for these relics, practitioners are to mix them with flour formed from the three medicinal fruits,[57] the three types of *Drosera peltata* herb (*rtag ngu rigs gsum*),[58] white and red sandal, saffron, and Himalayan march orchid (*dbang lag*),[59] and combine this concoction with fine rice flour or barley flour. The mixture is then to be rolled into pills the size of seven white mustard grains, allowed to dry completely, painted red with vermillion, and placed in a vase. The vase is to be decorated with a lid ornament of the five buddha families and a band around its neck.[60]

The text next describes the preparations for the ritual procedure: an earth claiming ritual (*sa chog*) is to be performed if the ritual is taking place where no such ritual has ever been held. Otherwise, just the preliminary practice and the offering of a white oblation will suffice. Whatever the case, the text instructs that as preparation for the ritual, a *maṇḍala* image of the *Tamer of Beings* drawn on fabric should be laid out, or, alternatively, this *maṇḍala* should be arranged using clusters of grain corresponding in number to the number of deities in the *maṇḍala*.[61] Regardless of the *maṇḍala* used for the rite, the pill-filled vase should be placed at its center, a *dhāraṇī* cord (*gzungs thag*) should be fastened to it, and oblations and offerings, corresponding with the activity, should be arranged before it. The ritual officiants should then toss the oblations, erect cairns of the four great protectors around the

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56 Ibid., 268.5. The practice of consuming the flesh of someone who has been born as a Brahmin for seven consecutive lifetimes is prevalent in a number of Indian Buddhist tantric traditions. The *Hevajratantra* and *Cakrasamvaratantra* are but two of the influential Indian Buddhist tantric scriptures that describe the positive effects of eating seven-times born Brahmin flesh. It appears that in Tibetan, where Brahmins would have been relatively rare, this criterion was relaxed to someone born for seven consecutive lives as a human being. For more on this substance and its role in Tibet as the primary active ingredient in the concoction of pills of power, see Gentry 2017: 259–290, and 296–316. For a discussion of Brahmin flesh in the context of the *Cakrasamvaratantra* and its commentarial traditions, see Gray 2005.

57 These are otherwise known as the "three fruits" (*'bras bu gsum*): yellow myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*), beleric myrobalan (*Terminalia bellerica*), and emblic myrobalan (*Phyllanthus emblica*) (*a ru ra/ ba ru ra/ skyu ru ra*). See dGa' ba'i rdo rje 2007 : 167–168, 140, 116; and Karma chos 'phel 1993: 23–27.

58 Karma chos 'phel 1993: 406–410.

59 dGa' ba'i rdo rje 2007: 255; and Karma chos 'phel 1993: 163, have this as an abbreviation for *dbang po lag pa*. dGa' ba'i rdo rje identifies this as *Gymnadenia orchidis Lindl*.

60 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 268.5–269.1.

61 Ibid., 269.1–.2.

perimeter of the ritual precinct, dissolve the corresponding visualization, offer more oblations, and entrust the accomplishment of the activity to oath-bound protectors.[62]

The main practice comes next. It involves the performance of the liturgy, *Tamer of Beings*, from the *mChog gling gter gsar* revelations, but tailored specifically for the preparation of "liberation through tasting" pills. Much like the procedure for the "liberation through seeing" *stūpa* described above, the ritual entails the well-choreographed performance of imagined cognitive imagery, vocal annunciations, and physical gestures, often featuring transactions with offerings, oblations, and other material objects—all focused on the pills in the vase at the center of the *maṇḍala*. Also similar to the "liberation through seeing" *stūpa*, the visualization entails imaginatively deconstructing the self and the vase, and re-envisioning them as buddhas through the standard tantric process of self-generation and front-generation deity yoga. Here practitioners are beckoned to reconfigure self, other, and environment as a pure land populated with fully awakened buddhas, who dynamically interact through their radiation and absorption of swirling rainbow lights, luminous ambrosia, luminous syllables, and other photic media of exchange. These luminous media of exchange, construed as fluid condensations of awakened presence, are imaginatively channeled into the vase, where they infuse and impregnate the pills inside. The *dhāraṇī* cord, which serves as the material lifeline in this process, is continuously held by the primary ritual officiant; it is also passed on to other participants during breaks to make for an uninterrupted flow of power into the vase.[63] The main part of each session has participants chant the following verses, followed by prolonged and constant repetition of the mantra of Avalokiteśvara that concludes them:

Mantra rosary from my heart
Go through the *vajra* path of the *dhāraṇī* cord.
Invoke the awakened mindstream of the divine assemble of the *maṇḍala* generated in front,
Especially that of the vase deity.

Light radiates from them all,
Making offerings to the assembly of gurus, tutelary deities,
Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and *ḍākinī*s throughout the ten directions,
Thus invoking their pledge.

All the blessings of their knowledge, love, and power

[62] Ibid., 269.2–.3.
[63] Ibid., 269.3–270.2.

Are concentrated in the form of luminous ambrosia.
Thus dissolving back, the *maṇḍala* blazes forth with extraordinary brilliance.
Radiating back out, all the karma and afflictions of the three realms are purified.

The external environment becomes a pure realm of noble ones.
The internal inhabitants become the Deity of Compassion, Tamer of Beings.[64]
One enters a state in which all sounds are the self-resounding of mantra
And all thoughts are an expanse of luminosity.

Through this meditative absorption that churns the depths of *saṃsāra*
Appearance and existence arise as the ground and awaken as a seal,
And the elixir of the essence of the five outer and inner elements
Swirls together into a single indivisible drop.

oṁ maṇi padme hūṁ hrī[65]

Each session is to end with 108 recitations of the *dhāraṇī* of *sdig sgrib kun 'joms*—seemingly derived from Guru Chos dbang's related cycle[66]—along with 21 recitations of the mantra for each of the main and surrounding deities, and the performance of offering, praise, and supplication.[67] The text stipulates that three or four such sessions are to be demarcated for each day of the ritual, but that the mantra recitation must be uninterrupted, so at least one participant should remain chanting throughout the breaks, even throughout the late night and early morning hours.[68] After giving a few directives for how to close the final evening sessions, the text states that the sequence should

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64 i.e., Avalokiteśvara.

65 Ibid., 270.2–271.1: *rang gi thugs nas sngags kyi phreng: gzungs thag rdo rje'i lam nas song: mdun bskyed dkyil 'khor lha tshogs dang: khyad par bum lha'i thugs rgyud bskul: de dag kun las 'od 'phros pas: phyogs bcu'i bla ma yi dam dang: sangs rgyas byang sems mkha' 'gro'i tshogs: mchod cing thugs dam rgyud bskul nas: mkhyen brtse nus pa'i byin rlabs kun: 'od zer bdud rtsi'i rnam par bsdus: thim pas gzi byin mchog tu 'bar: slar 'phros khams gsum las nyon sbyangs: phyi snod 'phags pa'i zhing khams la: nang bcud 'gro 'dul thugs rje'i lha: shra grag sngags kyi rang sgra dang: dran rtog 'od gsal dbyings kyi ngang: 'khor ba dong sprugs ting'dzin gyis: snang srid gzhir bzhengs phyag rgyar sad: phyi nang 'byung lnga'i dwangs ma'i bcus: dbyer med thig le gcig tu 'khyil: oṁ ma ṇi padme hūṁ hrīḥ:*

66 A practice featuring the *dhāraṇī* of *sdig sgrib kun 'joms*, or "destroyer of all negative deeds and obscurations" appears in Guru Chos dbang's revelation, *Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*. See Guru Chos dbang 1976–1980: 282. See also Kong sprul's explanation of this *dhāraṇī* and practice, in *sGrub thabs kun btus*,vol. 13: 287–291.

67 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 271.1–.2.

68 Ibid., 271.2–.3.

be repeated for seven days if there are at least 21 practitioners, or three days if there are only seven practitioners involved.[69]

The conclusion of the rite, which should take place on the morning of the eighth or fourth day, respectively, involves a special series of activities featuring an initiation in which the vase is opened and the pills are distributed to participants and audience members.[70]

The section closes by offering a citation, from an unnamed "tantra", which describes the many benefits of encountering such a pill:

> For any and all beings that have any kind of contact with this—whether they see it, hear of it, touch it, wear it around their neck, smell it, taste it, and so on—the misdeeds and obscurations they have accumulated throughout their lifetimes from time immemorial will be purified like a conch shell polished of stains. The karmic doorway to rebirth in *saṃsāra* and the lower realms will be closed. The seed of the higher realms and liberation will be sown. Moreover, all illness, demonic interference, and unhappiness will be quelled, and all lifespan, merit, and wisdom will expand. It will be a great protection of invincibility against obstructers and obstacles. In short, what need is there to express much else: one should know that the beings in whose stomach this pill falls will uphold the lineage of the noble ones and thus be equal in fortune to Avalokiteśvara.[71]

When compared with the *stūpa* that liberates through seeing, and the mantra that liberates through hearing, encountering the pill that liberates through tasting promises a far broader range of benefits. Included are not just closure of the door to bad migrations and generalized spiritual growth, but also the pragmatic goals of health, wealth, happiness, and protection—during this lifetime. Moreover, it is not just tasting the pill that can bring such effects. Any sensory contact with it whatsoever will do.

The concentration in the pill of multiple sensory media of interaction and effects is clarified somewhat by a related source that offers a lengthier version of the very same citation presented above. This citation appears in the "benefits" section of the *sādhana, Thugs rje chen po padma gtsug tor gyi myong grol ril bu'i sgrub thabs gzhan phan bdud*

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69 Ibid., 271.3–.4.

70 Ibid., 271.5–273.1.

71 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 273.6–274.4: *de nyid sems can gang dang gang gis mthong ngam: thos sam: reg gam: mgur du 'chang ba'am: dri tshor ba'am: khar myang ba sogs 'brel tshad thams cad tshe rabs thog ma med pa nas bsags pa'i sdig sgrib thams cad dung dkar gyi rdul phyis pa bzhin dag par 'gyur ro: 'khor ba dang ngan song du skye ba'i las kyi sgo chod par 'gyur so: mtho ris dang thar pa'i sa bon thebs par 'gyur ro: gzhan yang nad dang: gdon dang: yid mi bde ba thams cad zhi zhing: tshe dang bsod nams ye shes thams cad rgyas par 'gyur ro: bgegs dang bar du gcod pas mi tshugs pa'i srung ba chen por 'gyur ro: mdor na gzhan mang du spros ci dgos te: ril bu gang gi stor song ba'i sems can de 'phags pa'i gdung 'dzin pas spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug dang skal pa mnyam shes par bya'o:*

rtsi, composed by 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po; he names the *Ngan song dong sprugs 'gro ba 'dul ba'i rgyud chen po* as its scriptural source.[72] The lengthier citation here outlines three registers for the pill concoction's efficacy: 1) the actual (*don*) liberation through tasting ambrosia as the unborn, 2) the semiotic/indexical (*rtags*) level as the elixir of the seven-times born [flesh], and 3) the symbolic/designated/sign (*mtshan ma*) level as the perfectly accomplished pill.[73] In this way, this triad of *don*, *rtags*, and *mtshan ma* functions to organize the substance along a spectrum of signification—from the actual level, in which signifier and signified have collapsed in the realization of emptiness; to the indexical level, where the substance is composed of the potent flesh of one who once realized the actual; down to the symbolic level, in which pills are produced from traces of the former substance, along with other materials, and their power is augmented, often to the point of animation, through intensive group ritual action. mKhyen brtse'i dbang po prefaces this citation with a telling explanatory remark guiding readers to apply this passage from the *Ngan song dong sprugs 'gro ba 'dul ba'i rgyud chen po* to the other liberation through senses objects:

> What is illustrated through the initiation into such a liberation through tasting ambrosia is also how to acquire vast benefit from things that liberate all beings through the four channels of seeing, hearing, recollecting, and touching.[74]

Similar to the levels of "liberation" witnessed above—liberation from negative circumstances in this life, from bad future rebirths in the next life, and from *saṃsāra* as a whole, depending on the qualities of experiencers—this adumbration of different dimensions of liberation through tasting pills (and, for that matter, other objects that claim to confer liberation through sensory experiences), helps open the way to acknowledge the powers of special objects, while also accommodating them to the ultimate goal of non-dual wisdom and to the requisite role of subsequent ritual treatment in their preparation and use. Not only are certain things like relic pills intrinsically powerful, the very stuff of non-dual wisdom, with real pragmatic effects in the world, they are also symbols for that wisdom and indices to those who once realized it or are instrumental in its ritual treatment and proliferation.

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[72] 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po 1975–1980: 58.4–59.4. The passage cited in *An Astonishing Ocean* appears nearly verbatim in this text on 58.6–59.4.

[73] Ibid., 58.4–.5.

[74] Ibid., 58.3: *de lta bu'i myong grol bdud rtsi'i dbang bskur bas mtshon mthong thod dran reg gis 'gro ba thams cad grol ba bzhi ldan gyi phan yon rlabs po che 'thob pa'i tshul…*

2.d. Liberation through touching

Next in the series of liberations comes "liberation through touching," specifically, "liberation through touching the sand of Vairocana that purifies the lower realms" (*rnam snang ngan song sbyong ba'i bye ma reg grol*).[75] Following the pattern observed thus far, this section begins by stipulating the material specifications of the substance: the ritual officiant is to procure from the bank of a great river sand that is pure, in that no human or dog has trammeled upon it. The ritual officiant is to then roast it a little, douse it with fragrant substances like saffron water and the like, mix it with white mustard seed, and place the concoction in a vessel. Then the ritual officiant should place a vase containing the twenty-five substances[76] on a tray, on top of a clean platform; this becomes the focal point of the subsequent liturgy.

The liturgy can be performed by a group of several practitioners, in which case it should only be done for only a day, or by a single individual, in which case it should be performed until the requisite mantras are recited.[77] Whatever the case, participants are to observe ritual purity throughout the proceedings by refraining from meat, alcohol, and other polluting substances.[78] After their preliminary performance of refuge, *bodhicitta*, and self-generation deity yoga visualization, practitioners proceed to the main section of the practice.[79] The main part entails, once again, the highly choreographed performance of imaginative visualization exercises, liturgical chanting and mantra recitation, and gestures, all with the vase concoction as the focal point. Here one first imagines that the vase transforms into a jewel vase, with Vairocana at its center, surrounded by the ten other

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75 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 274.4.

76 Ibid., 274.5: *bum pa nyer lnga'i rdzas ldan*. *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* (2002: 1398–1399) lists the 25 substances under the heading "25 vase substances" (*bum rdzas nyer lnga*) as follows: The five precious substances (*rin po che lnga*) of 1) gold (*gser*), 2) silver (*dngul*), 3) coral (*byu ru*), 4) pearl (*mu tig*), and 5) copper (*zangs*); the five medicines (*sman lnga*) of 6) Himalayan march orchid (*dbang lag*; *Gymnadenia crassinervis*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 163), 7) raspberry (*kaṇṭākāri*: *kaṇḍakari*, *Rubus idaeopsisfocke*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 104), 8) heart-leaved moonseed (*sle tres*, corrected from *sle khres*; *Tinospora cordifolia*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 103), 9) bamboo manna/silica (*cu gang*), and 10) sweet flag (*shu dag dkar po*; *shu* is corrected from *sha*; *Acorus gramineus*, cf. Karma chos 'phel 1993: 157); the five fragrances (*dri lnga*) of 11) camphor (*ga bur*), 12) musk (*gla rtsi*), 13) nutmeg (*dza ti*), 14) saffron (*gur gum*), and 15) sandal (*tsandan*); the five grains (*'bru lnga*) of 16) barley (*nas*), 17) wheat (*gro*), 18) sesame (*til*), 19) pulse (*sran ma*), and 20) rice (*'bras*); and the five essences of 21) salt (*lan tshwa*), 22) sesame oil (*til mar*), 23) butter (*mar*), 24) raw sugar (*bu ram*), and honey (*sbrang rtsi*).

77 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 276.1.

78 Ibid., 274.5–.6

79 Ibid., 274.6.

deities of the *Churning the Depths of the Lower Reams* (*Ngan song dong sprugs*) *maṇḍala*.[80] While then chanting the liturgy and mantra, one imagines that light radiates from Vairocana's forehead, purifies the evil deeds and obscurations of the six classes of beings, and absorbs back into him, conveying the compassion of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. Vairocana's body then issues a stream of ambrosia, which fills the vase and overflows from its spout. Practitioners expressly imagine that this ambrosial flow dissolves into the material substance in the physical vase, which thus becomes endowed with the potency (*nus pa*)—indivisible from the light that issues from the buddhas and bodhisattvas—to quell all karma, afflictions, evil deeds, obscurations, and suffering.[81] The "mantra for purifying the lower realms" (*ngan song sbyong ba'i sngags*) is to be recited one hundred thousand times, or however many times is possible, along with the mantras of the central deity and each deity in the entourage.[82] At the conclusion of the rite, Vairocana and the other deities are imagined to dissolve into light and merge with the ambrosia in the vase. The contents of the vase are then poured onto the sand, mixed in, and the concoction is left out to dry.[83]

In keeping with the pattern observed thus far, this section ends with a citation, from an unnamed source, that spells out how this sand is to be used and the benefits of interacting with it:

> By hurling it, taking as a focal point a living being, or the corpse, bones, a piece of fabric, hair, nails, and so forth of a deceased being, all their evil deeds and obscurations will be pacified. Even by tossing it in the wind, in the direction from where the wind is blowing, all beings touched by it will have their obscurations purified and gain the fortune to reach awakening. Even by tossing it into a charnel ground, the evil deeds, obscurations, and bad migrations of the deceased left there will be purified. This amazing [technique] is easy to do, with little hardship.[84]

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80 Ibid., 274.6–275.2. *Churning the Depths of the Lower Reams* (*Ngan song dong sprugs*) seems to be used interchangeably throughout this liturgy with *Tamer of Beings who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra*, or simply *Tamer of Beings*, the name of the governing *maṇḍala* introduced earlier.

81 Ibid., 275.2–.4.

82 Ibid., 275.4–.6.

83 Ibid., 275.6–276.1.

84 Ibid.,: 276.1–.3: *'di ni tshe dang ldan pa'am: shi ba'i ro dang rus pa dang: gos dum skra sen sogs kyang rung: de la gmigs pa'i rten byas nas: brabs pas sdig sgrib thams cad zhi: rdzi phyogs rlung la bskur bas kyang: de yis reg pa'i skye 'gro kun: sgrib dag byang chub skal ldan 'gyur: dur khrod chen por gtor bas kyang: de la bzhag pa'i tshe 'das kyi: sdig sgrib ngan song sbyong bar byed: bya sla tshegs chung ngo mtshar che:*

Perhaps most notable in this passage is that the intentionality of the beings effected seems to play absolutely no role in the efficacy of the sand; contact alone will suffice. Moreover, the sand brings benefits to living and dead alike, through even the most tenuous of physical links. However, Kong sprul somewhat mitigates this strong claim in the passage that immediately follows this citation by placing explicit emphasis on the intentionality of the ritual specialist who prepares the sand. After acknowledging that this technique is certainly suitable to implement, since it is often taught in the *caryā tantra*s, Kong sprul adds that the benefit of the technique is uncertain if ritualists do not follow the procedure properly, and instead of being sufficiently focused on the meditation, only casually blow on the sand with a few mantra recitations, and neglect the proper conduct of abstention from alcohol, meat, and the other observations of ritual purity.[85] It seems, then, that with sand that liberates through contact the role of intentionality shifts to that of the ritual specialist. Properly prepared, the sand can positively impact all beings, regardless of whether they are living, or dead. But this depends entirely on the stability and knowledge of the master who prepares it.

2.e. Liberation through recollecting

We shift our attention now to the first item in the list of eleven techniques that is not framed directly in terms of a sensory encounter: "liberation through recollecting a *stūpa* of Ratnasambhava Śākyamuni" (*rin 'byung śāk thub kyi mchod rten dran grol ba*).[86] Although this technique involves the cognitive operation of recollection, rather than an explicitly sensory encounter, it nonetheless requires the construction of a potent object—a *stūpa*—and is thus somewhat similar to the technique of liberation through seeing a *stūpa* discussed above. Here, however, it is "bringing the *stūpa* to mind" in an act of recollecting a previous visual encounter that ensures efficacy, rather than seeing it directly.

The material specifications for this *stūpa* stipulate that it be constructed at a busy thoroughfare, charnel ground, or anywhere else a lot of people circulate and gather.[87] After performing an earth claiming ritual of suitable elaboration, the requisite building materials of earth and stone are to be blessed with *dhāraṇī mantra* and fashioned into a *bodhi stūpa*.[88] On the stone surface of the *stūpa*'s bulbous center,

[85] Ibid., 276.3–.5.
[86] Ibid., 276.5.
[87] Ibid., 276.5.
[88] Ibid., 276.5–.6.

the "vase," is to be etched the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*, before the entire structure is painted and sealed with varnish.[89] Similar to standard *stūpa* consecration procedure, the life-pillar of the *stūpa* is to be filled with the mantras of Vajrasattva and the *Pratītyasamutpāda hṛdaya* (*rten snying*),[90] and fixed in place. The rest of the vase-shaped center is likewise to be filled, but with the two *dhāraṇī* mantras "mentioned previously," presumably meaning those that figure in the liberation through seeing *stūpa*, as well as with the *four groups of great dhāraṇī* (*gzungs chen sde bzhi*).[91] A Buddha relic, together with the circular diagram of *Sems nyid ngal gso*, which features later in the liturgy, in the "liberation through wearing" technique, are also to be interred once they are scented with perfume, wrapped in silk, and placed inside a jewel relic box or a clay casket to protect them from moisture.[92] The petition which was attached to the main mantra in the preparation of the *stūpa* that liberates through seeing is also to be used here as an addendum to the interred mantras.[93]

Once the *stūpa* has been constructed to specification it becomes the focal point of ritual action. After performing ablution, purification, and consecration rites, according to the general procedure, the ritual officiant is beckoned to don clean clothes, perform the restoration and purification of lapsed vows (Tib. *gso sbyong*, Skt. *poṣadha*), and arrange offerings before the *stūpa*.[94] Then comes the liturgy proper, which follows the same pattern outlined above with the other liberations: the ritual specialist is to perform a series of coordinated cognitive, vocal, and physical operations, with the *stūpa*, and its life-pillar in particular, as the explicit focal point. Following the same pattern, the buddhas of the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala* radiate and absorb light that merges them with the *stūpa*'s life-pillar and imbues it with their abiding presence. Here, however, Buddha Śākyamuni replaces Akṣobhya as the central buddha, and the liturgical visualization culminates by imagining that "for whomever recollects this [*stūpa*], the brilliance of the wisdom of liberation will blaze forth."[95] Another point of distinction is that the

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89 Ibid., 276.6.

90 *rTen cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i sning po* (*Pratītyasamutpādahṛdaya*), Tōh. 521/981.

91 Ibid., 276.6–277.1. The *gZungs chen sde bzhi* refers to a group of four *dhāraṇī*s that figure prominently as "filling" for reliquaries and statues. They include *gTsug tor rnam rgyal* (Tōh. 597/984), *gTsug tor dri med* (Tōh. 599/983) *gSang ba ring bsrel* (Tōh. 507/883) and *Byang chub rgyan 'bum* (Tōh. 508). These four are more typically part of the rubric *gZungs chen sde lnga*, which also includes the *Pratītyasamutpāda hṛdaya* (*rTen 'brel snying po*). For more on standard *stūpa* consecration rituals in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

92 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 277.2–.3.

93 Ibid., 277.2.

94 Ibid., 277.3.–.5.

95 Ibid., 278.2–.5: *gang gis dran pas grol ba yi: ye shes gzi byin 'bar bar gyur:*

mantras to be recited are those of Vajrasattva and the *Pratītyasamutpādpa hṛdaya*. Per the usual protocol, the ritual concludes with offering, praise, prayers, and further recitations. But added to this is the recollection of the hundred qualities of the Buddha, the recollection of the other Three Jewels, and the recitation of the *Heart Sūtra*, sealed with the practice of emptiness.[96] Three or four such sessions a day are to be demarcated, and the ritual as a whole is to conclude once the requisite number of mantra recitations or days is complete; most importantly, the rite's conclusion should coincide with the day of the full moon.[97]

The benefits of this technique are then outlined with a concluding verse citation:

> If through just bringing this receptacle to mind
> Evil deeds and suffering are pacified,
> And lifespan, merit, and well-being expand,
> Then how could one describe the benefit
>
> From prostrating, making offerings, and circumambulating it?
> Therefore, the devout
> Should build a reliquary at a major thoroughfare, a crossroads, and the like,
> And do this (i.e., prostrate, make offerings…)—
> There will be unceasing welfare for beings.[98]

In keeping with the dynamics observed thus far, this citation implies that the positive effects of encountering this *stūpa* and recollecting it range from longevity, wealth, and fortune in this life, to purification of suffering and negative karma in the next, and perhaps also the loftier goal of spiritual progress as well. Here the *stūpa*'s "mere recollection" is sufficient to bring about mundane effects, but the benefits from taking this recollection a step further and physically revering the *stūpa* in person, presumably as an expression of inward devotion, amplifies these effects into loftier, "ineffable" spheres.

2.f. Liberation through cultivating

Next comes the technique among the eleven liberations that seems most explicitly tied to the development of mental states, rather than to

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96 Ibid., 279.4–.5.

97 Ibid., 279.6.

98 Ibid., 279.6–280.1: *rten 'di yid la byas tsam gyis: sdig dang sdug bsngal zhi ba dang: tshe bsod legs tshogs 'phel 'gyur na: phyag mchod bskor ba bgyis pa yi: phan yon brjod kyis ga la langs: de phyir mos par ldan rnams kyis: lam srang bzhi mdo la sogs su: mchod rten bzhengs na tshul 'di bya: 'gro don rgyun mi 'chad pa 'byung:*

the engagement with sensory objects. "Cultivating," here, renders the Tibetan term *sgom*, which is perhaps more commonly translated into English as "meditation." Here, however, rather than signal the cultivation of freedom from sensory experiences and objects, the term refers specifically to cultivating, meditating on, or assimilating one's mind to a particularly potent object of reflection: Amitābha's pure land of Sukhāvatī. The section heading might then be sensibly rendered as "liberation through cultivating preparation for Amitābha's pureland"(*snang ba mtha' yas kyi zhing sbyong sgom grol*).[99]

The material specifications for this technique are relatively simple, and, strictly speaking, not required to ensure its complete efficacy. The text stipulates that practitioners arrange in front of them, on the fifteenth day of the month, the holy day of Amitābha, the receptacle of a painting, statue, or the like depicting the pure land of Sukhāvatī.[100] It also calls for them to arrange offerings in front of it according to their means. However, the text is quick to acknowledge, the material support is not strictly necessary; visualization of the pure land suffices to ensure efficacy.[101]

The liturgy for this technique is also quite basic: after performing the prerequisites of refuge, *bodhicitta*, the four immeasurables, and meditation on emptiness, practitioners are beckoned to imagine that out of emptiness emerges the pure land of Sukhāvatī, precisely as described in *sūtra*s, and that the practitioner has transformed into Avalokiteśvara, situated in front of Amitābha.[102] Practitioners are then to perform prostrations, offerings, and prayers before Amitābha, and during session breaks, they are to gather the causes for rebirth in the pure land through bringing Sukhāvatī to mind as frequently as possible. As a daily practice, practitioners are also to visualize that light radiates from their own hearts, invoking the awakened mindstreams of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, who in turn radiate the light of their compassion back to purify their own and all other beings' obscurations, thus making practitioners suitable vessels, replete with the requisite causes and conditions to be reborn in the pure land of Sukhāvatī. As part of this visualization exercise, practitioners are required to also recite Amitābha's mantra as many times as possible, along with the "*dhāraṇī* of recollection," and, as the main part of the practice, to focus one-pointedly and with fierce devotion on the layout of the pure land, precisely as described in *sūtra*s. All virtuous actions, moreover, are to be dedicated to rebirth there, and earnest aspirations

99 Ibid., 280.2.
100 Ibid., 280.2–.3.
101 Ibid., 280.3.
102 Ibid., 280.6–281.

are to be made in kind. This section concludes by instructing to cultivate this vision regularly before sleep at night, and by promising that if one cultivates this vision without interruption, at death, by the power of the buddhas (*sangs rgyas mthu*), their obscurations will be purified and they will surely be reborn in the pure land of Sukhāvatī.

In this technique we therefore have a standard practice of recollecting the Buddha, yoked to visualization of Buddha Amitābha in his pure land of Sukhāvatī, with the generalized Mahāyāna goal of achieving rebirth there. The inclusion of this practice among these eleven techniques underscores the continuities between Tibetan tantric Treasure practices and the pure land-related practices of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism.[103]

2.g. Liberation through drinking

The next technique in the list of eleven returns us squarely to the domain of the senses, but instead of operate through a particular sensory medium, this technique promises liberation by way of ingestion, specifically, "liberation through drinking from the stream of Amoghasiddhi Bhaiṣajyaguru (*don grub sman gyi bla ma'i 'babs chu 'thung grol*).[104]

The material specifications for this technique are as follows: the ritual officiant is instructed to etch on the surface of a flat, smooth, hard stone the form of the Medicine Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru, and to etch on its back the associated *dhāraṇī mantra*.[105] Then it is to be painted, sealed with veneer, and serve as the focal point of rites of purification, ablution, and consecration, before its eyes are opened and it is invested with power (*mnga' dbul).*[106] The text states that it would be most excellent if a spring flowing from a pure and pleasant place, which is sure to flow into the communal drinking water, could be used. But even without such, the ritual officiant is instructed to locate the fount of a stream used by all the [local] people and cattle, fashion a small stone structure there, and "request" the etched stone to "stably remain" (*brtan por bzhugs su gsol*), as though it were a venerable person, such that its bottom is brought into contact with the water source (*chu*

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[103] For discussions of different orientations with regard to "buddha recollection" practice (*buddhānusmṛti*) in Indian Buddhist traditions, including analysis of connections to pure land practice, visualization practice, and the development of Mahāyāna scriptures and doctrinal notions—the confluence of which appears to have significantly informed the practice of liberation through recollecting presented here—see Harrison 1978, 1992, and 2003.

[104] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 284.6–285.1.

[105] Ibid., 285.1.

[106] Ibid., 285.1–.2.

dang thug par byas).[107] Next, offerings are to be arranged in front of it. And yellow myrobalan (*a ru ra*) is to be gathered, pulverized into small pieces, and placed close at hand.[108]

The liturgy entails the preliminaries of self-generation, along with recitation, once again, according to the ritual manual of *Tamer of Beings* (*'gro 'dul las byang*).[109] For the main part of the liturgy, practitioners are to perform the elaborate invitation, installment, dissolution, consecration, and offerings and praises, while observing the front-generation visualization of Amoghasiddhi Bhaiṣajyaguru. Practitioners are then to recite the *dhāraṇī* of Bhaiṣajyaguru in sets of 1,000, thereby incanting the yellow myrobalan.[110] At the end, they are to "open the medicine" (*sman phye*) and "toss it into the mouth" (*zhal du 'thor*) of the stream, while supplicating Bhaiṣajyaguru to purify all the beings it touches of all temporary illnesses of elemental imbalances, and ultimate illnesses of the three poisons, karma, obstructions, evil deeds, and suffering.[111] The text instructs practitioners to repeat the ritual three times, recite the supplication 108 times, and then recite and visualize as follows:

> Imagine that the stream of wisdom compassion
> That ceaselessly flows
> From the alms bowl of ambrosia in his (i.e., Bhaiṣajyaguru's) hands
> Is mingled indivisibly with the stream of water,
> Such that everyone who douses themselves, drinks, or cleanses themselves with it
> Will be cured of illness, demonic interference, evil deeds, and obscurations.[112]

The liturgy concludes with offering, praise, confession, long-life prayers, aspirations, and auspicious verses.

The benefits are then outlined in a single verse citation:

> For as long as this buddha image
> And the stream of water remain,
> Whoever partakes of this stream of water

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[107] Ibid., 285.2–.3.

[108] Ibid., 285.3.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid., 285.4–286.1.

[111] Ibid., 286.1–.4.

[112] Ibid., 286.5–.6: *phyag gi bdud rtsi'i lhung bzed las: ye shes thugs rje'i chu rgyun ni: rgyun chad med par byung ba nyid: chu bo'i rgyun dang dbyer med 'dres: gang gis 'thor 'thung khrus byed kun: nad gdon sdig sgrib zhi bar bsam:*

> Shall be cured of illnesses, demonic interferences, evil deeds, and obstructions.[113]

The healing properties of water, now merged with Bhaiṣajyaguru's medicinal ambrosia, is a point of emphasis in this technique. Not only is the curing of illness an explicit effect of interaction with this water, but even the more long-term aims of purifying evil deeds and obscurations are framed in terms of healing. The empowerment of the stream, moreover, is clearly intended to positively impact all who drink of its waters, or have any other contact with it. Here, the intentionality of the consumer, or his or her level of spiritual development, is not mentioned as a factor impacting the water's efficacy. In this the technique of liberation through drinking appears to borrow from the discourse of Tibetan medicine to present a case in which medicinal substance is imbued with its own intrinsic power to heal, on several registers, regardless of whether or not consumers are aware of the water's healing properties. But "liberation" here is circumscribed to freedom from illness, negative karma, and obscurations; ultimate liberation from *saṃsāra* is not even hinted at as a possible effect.

2.h. Liberation through wearing

The next item in our list of eleven liberations is a technique for granting "liberation through wearing," specifically, as the section heading tells us, "liberation through wearing of Ārya Sems nyid ngal gso" (*'phags pa sems nyid ngal gso'i btags grol*); this refers specifically to wearing as an amulet a circular diagram[114] connected with a form of Avalokiteśvara otherwise known as Khasarpaṇi.[115]

The basic material specifications for making this item require that it be prepared on an auspicious day during the waxing period of a lunar month; that someone with pure *samaya* serve as the writer (*'bri mkhan*); that the writing surface (*'bri gzhi*) be made of silk, cloth, paper, or

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[113] Ibid., 287.1–.2: *sangs rgyas sku dang chu bo'i rgyun: ji srid gnas kyi bar nyid du: chu bo'i rgyun der sus spyod pa: nad gdon sdig sgrib zhi bar 'gyur:*

[114] The Tibetan term here, *tsa kra*, transliterates the Sanskrit word *cakra* ("circle," or "wheel"). In this context it can refer also to *yantra* and *maṇḍala* to broadly denote any magical circular diagram incorporating mantra, imagery, and special substances that is worn to elicit a wide range of pragmatic and soteriological effects. For a catalogue of these items as they are used and worn by Tibetans to address pragmatic concerns, including reproductions of their diagrams and speech formulas, see Skorupski 1983. For more on such "circles" and their historical relationships with *yantra* and *maṇḍala* in the broader Indian context, see Bühnemann 2003.

[115] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 287.2.

whatever one can muster, smeared with liberation through tasting *samaya* substance (*myang grol dam rdzas*); and that the ink (*'bri rdzas*) be gold and silver, or vermillion/blood and ilk, mixed with perfume and molten gem.[116]

The remaining material specifications are three-fold, based on whether the diagram will be highly elaborate, of middling elaboration, or basic. To make the more elaborate version an outline of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings* should be drawn to specification, with four gates, porticoes, courtyard, surrounding precinct, and the rest. And in the place of each deity should be written in a circle the *dhāraṇī mantra* of each, along with its addendum. The petition (*'dod gsol*) and auspicious verses should then be written in the precinct outside that. The manner of arranging the stone fence and fire mountains behind it is shared with the version of middling elaboration.[117]

To prepare the version of middling elaboration, six layers of concentric circles should be drawn, and at their center, the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara, and the long *dhāraṇī* of Akṣobhya should be written.[118] Surrounding them, in the form of a garland, should be written the mantra of Karmasattva, followed by this addendum in Tibetan:

> Through the blessing of this great *vidyā*, may everyone who sees, hears, recalls, or touches this, and, in particular, all who wear it be pacified of all evil deeds and obscurations of body, speech, and mind, along with their propensities, and may all their lifespan, merit, and wisdom expand![119]

Behind it should be drawn an eight-petal lotus, marked with the *dhāraṇī*s and essence mantras of Sarvavid in the east, Śākyamuni in the south, Amitābha in the west, Bhaiṣajyaguru in the north, 'Khor ba dong sprugs in the southeast, Amoghapāśa in the southwest, Padmoṣnīṣa in the northwest, and Vajrasāra in the northeast.[120] Behind that should be drawn a four-petal lotus, marked with the essence mantras of Vajrapāṇi in the east, sMre brtsegs in the south, Vajravidhāraṇa in the west, and Amṛtakuṇḍali in the north.[121] The petition cited just above should be written after each mantra. With the

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116 Ibid., 287.3–.4.
117 Ibid., 287.4–.5.
118 Ibid., 287.5–.6.
119 Ibid., 288.1–.3: *rig pa chen po 'di'i byin rlabs kyis mthong thos dran reg thams cad dang: khyad par 'chang ba po'i lus ngag yid gsum gyi sdig sgrib bag chags dang bcas pa thams cad zhi ba dang: tshe dang bsod nams ye shes thams cad rgyas par gyur cig:*
120 Ibid., 288.3–.4.
121 Ibid., 288.4–.5.

exception of the central mantras, they should all be written with the tops of the letters facing out.[122]

Making the simple version requires that one draw the same concentric circles outlined above, but write at their center the seed-syllables *hūṁ hūṁ hrīḥ* stacked atop one another; draw an eight-petal lotus, marked with *hūṁ* on each petal in the cardinal directions, and *hrī* on each petal in the intermediate directions; and write behind it the seven-syllable mantra of *Tamer of Beings*, the four-syllable essence mantra of Karmasattva, the Sanskrit syllabary, the *Pratītyasamutpāda hṛdaya*, and the prose Tibetan addendum, all surrounded by a stone enclosure and fire-mountains.[123]

Once the diagram has been drawn to specification, its ritual treatment begins with an ablution and consecration rite done "according to common procedure" (*spyi mthun*).[124] The diagram is then to be placed at the center of a raised platform, ensuring that the front and back are not mixed up, with lavish offerings and oblations arranged in front of it.

The liturgy once again follows the typical pattern witnessed thus far—visualizations, mantra recitations, and gestures are performed in tandem—this time centering on the diagram and its imaginative construal as the Khasarpaṇi form of Avalokiteśvara at the center of the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. The goal is to invoke the awakened wisdom of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the ten directions, such that their wisdom, now spurred to action, assumes the forms of colorful luminous deity images, mantras, and hand implements, which merge indivisibly with the diagram, and thereby enliven the circular diagram with their awakened presence.[125] The main part of the liturgy session entails maintaining this visualization one-pointedly while reciting numerous times the various mantras written on the diagram. At the end of the session, the ritual master is to recite seven or three times this supplication:

oṁ

Bhagavān, whose nature is compassion,
Deities of the *maṇḍala* of *Churner of the Depths of the Lower Realms*—
Please consider me!

To enact the benefit of beings as far as space pervades—
For myself and all infinite beings—

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122 Ibid., 288.5.
123 Ibid., 288.6–289.2.
124 Ibid., 289.2.
125 Ibid., 289.3–290.1.

I beg you, Lord, to reside firmly in this receptacle,
And pacify the evil deeds, obscurations and suffering,

Expand the lifespan, merit, and wealth,
Develop the wisdom,
And swiftly establish on the level of buddhahood,
Anyone, who with devotion wears,
Sees, hears, recalls, or touches
The supreme *maṇḍala* of the great *vidyā*.[126]

The rite concludes with the burning of incense, the playing of music, and the chanting of the following aspiration:

May all who wear, or who see, hear, recollect, or touch
The great *maṇḍala*, which is *mantra* in form,
For the divine assembly, which is wisdom in essence,
Generated, accordingly, in the circle
Gain the ability to be established in awakening![127]

Once the liturgy is over, the text outlines specifications for its use. It instructs to fold the circle without damaging the center and wrap it in five-color cords, put this inside a covering or an amulet box so that it does not get damaged, and wear it like a usual "liberation through wearing," that is, close around the neck or arm pit so that it never gets cold.[128]

The benefits of wearing this diagram as an amulet are then outlined with the following citation:

It will pacify evil deeds and obscurations, increase lifespan and merit,
And expand stainless wisdom
Even for those who have committed the deeds of immediate retribution,
Let along for Dharma practitioners (*chos dang ldan pa*).

Beings who are alive
Will be free from bad migrations and reach the heavens.
Burn it with a corpse at death
And the deceased will be cared for by Ārya [Avalokiteśvara] in the

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126 Ibid., 290.3–.6: *oṁ: thugs rje'i bdag nyid bcom ldan 'das: ngan song dong sprugs dkyil 'khorlha: bdag la dgongs par mdzad du gsol: bdag dang mtha' yas sems can la: mkha khyab 'gro 'don mdzad pa'i slad: rten 'dir mgon po rtag bzhugs nas: rig pa chen po'i dkyil 'khor mchog: gang gis dad pa'i 'chang ba dang: mthong thod dran reg thams cad kyang: sdig sgrib sdug bsngal zhi ba dang: tshe bsod 'byor pa 'phel ba dang: ye shes rgyas par mdzad nas kyang: myur du sangs rgyas sar 'god gsol:*

127 Ibid., 291.1–.2: *'khor lor ji ltar bskyed pa yi: ngo bo ye shes lha tshogs la: rnam pa sngags kyi dkyil 'khor che: 'chang dang mthong thos dran reg kun: byang chub dgod pa'i nus ldan gyur:*

128 Ibid., 291.4–.5.

intermediate state.
The signs of this [happening] are the appearance of rainbow lights, bones, and relics [at cremation].[129]

While much can be said about this practice of amulet production and the range of effects in store for those who interact with it, three general features stand out: 1) the diagram amulet brings positive effects no matter how it is encountered—whether it is seen, heard, recollected, or touched; 2) this dynamic of contagious power can bring effects to anyone, even particularly heinous sinners, or the deceased, regardless of how they interact with the amulet; and 3) interactions with the amulet hasten the widest possible spectrum of effects. These range from the mundane level of expanded wealth and lifespan, to the karmic level of deliverance from negative future lives and rebirth among the gods. But the practice resolutely emphasizes the "expansion of wisdom" as its loftiest possible effect, and even includes the emergence of relics as a concrete side effect indicative of the amulet diagram's obvious efficacy.

This combination of features comes visibly to the fore in the section that follows. Here, Kong sprul draws in large part from Guru Chos dbang's *tantra* of *The Great Compassionate One who Churns the Depths of Saṃsāra* (*Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba dong sprugs kyi rgyud*) to offers five additional uses for the diagram, detailing the ritual specifications of each.[130] The first or these—"pervading the sunny sky" (*nyi ma mkha' khyab*)—calls for the diagram to be affixed to the tip of a banner and ritually treated with the material specifications of a *maṇḍala*, offerings, and oblations, before it is integrated into a liturgy featuring visualizations, mantras, and special supplications. The goal of this usage is to merge the power of the diagram, now infused with the luminous blessings of all buddhas, with the sun and its light, directed by the wish that "all beings on whom its light shines be established in the state of Ārya (Avalokiteśvara)."[131]

The second special technique, "pervading the expanse of rivers" (*chu bo'i dbyings khyab*), extends this logic of contagion to large bodies of water by infusing it with the power of the diagram so that "all who drink of it be purified of obscurations and attain qualities."[132] The third technique, "a *stūpa* focal point" (*dmigs gtad mchod rten*), entails

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[129] Ibid., 291.5–.6: *mtshams med las la sbyad pa yang: sdig sgrib zhi zhing tshe bsod 'phel: zag med ye shes rgyas par 'gyur: chod dang ldan pa smos ci dgos: dbugs la slebs pa'i 'gro ba yang: ngan song thar zhing mtho ris thob: 'chi dus ro dang lhan cig bsreg: bar dor 'phags pas rjes bzung rtags: 'ja' 'od gdung dang ring bsrel 'byung:*

[130] The parallel passages appear in Gu ru Chos dbang: 286.4–298.6.

[131] Ibid., 292.5: *'od kyis phog pa'i skye 'gro kun: 'phags pa'i go 'phang bkod par gyur:*

[132] Ibid., 293.3–.4: *'thung tshad sgrib dag yon tan thob:*

interring the diagram, right-side up and facing front, inside a *stūpa* situated at a busy thoroughfare or market place.[133] The fourth usage, "benefiting beings at the head of roads" (*lam so'i 'gro don*), stipulates writing the diagram on a hard surface and posting it at a location protected from the elements where it can be "seen by everyone," such as on the door of a temple, a palace gate, or a busy thoroughfare.[134] The fifth technique, "benefiting beings from the food in the kitchen" (*g.yos khang zas kyi 'gro don*), extends the logic of contagious power and blessings to the kitchen, stipulating that the diagram be etched in the stone or drawn on the clay used for the construction of the hearth, with the following aim in mind:

> May all the food prepared in this oven
> Transform into ambrosial elixir
> And thereby purify obscurations, complete accumulations, and
> accomplish alchemy.
> May it purify the debt of food
> And enable sponsors to reach the path to liberation![135]

All five of these techniques involve their own material specifications and subsequent ritual treatments, including visualizations, mantra recitations, gestures, and the uses of other material objects like offerings, oblations, and other ritual paraphernalia. Furthermore, this adumbration of five techniques ends by insisting that a key point for the efficacy of these pith instructions is that the practitioner also wear the diagram that liberates through wearing while he carries out preparations and ritual treatments. The benefit for ritual masters employing the diagram in this way is then affirmed in a closing citation:

> The person who makes efforts to benefit others in this way
> Will be the same as Ārya [Avalokiteśvara] himself.
> He/she will by a sublime upholder of the Conqueror's lineage,
> And quickly and surely attain awakening.[136]

In this way, the production, use, and range of effects of diagram amulets stipulated in *An Awesome Ocean* is founded foremost on the principle of contagion. This principle finds expression on a number of different registers: first, the written mantra syllables and deity images

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133 Ibid., 293.4–.6.

134 Ibid., 293.6–294.3.

135 Ibid., 294.3, and 294.5: *:bdud rtsi'i bcud du 'gyur ba yis: sgrib dag tshogs rdzogs bcud len 'grub: zas kyi bu lon kun byang nas: sbyin bdag rnams kyang thar lam zin:*

136 Ibid., 294.6–295.1: *de ltar gzhan la phan brtson pa'i: mi de 'phags pa nyid dang mtshungs: rgyal ba'i gdung 'dzin dam pa ste: myur du byang chub nges par 'grub:*

that form the diagram are construed as condensed expressions of awakening, enabling the agency of buddhas to extend across immaterial/material divides; second, the diagram, turned receptacle, then serves as a locus for a welter of ritual activity, whose aim is to further infuse it with the awakened agency of buddhas by ritually enlivening its mantras and deity images with their presence; finally, the product, as doubly animated—once through the use of mantras and deity images in the first instance, and then through the consecration ceremony's infusion of the diagram with awakened presence and agency—poises the diagram amulet to bring its liberatory effects to whomever, whatever, and wherever it comes into contact, no matter the sensory medium, or even whether the recipient is alive, or dead. But its effects, the liturgy implies, nonetheless vary, based on who makes contact with it, and how.

2.h. Liberation through training

The ninth item in the sequence of eleven methods for liberation is "liberation through training in the restoration and purification of Amoghapāśa" (*don yod zhags pa'i gso sbyong bslab grol*),[137] Amoghapāśa being another form of Avalokiteśvara. "Restoration and purification" typically refers to the fortnightly monastic rite of *poṣadha* purification, in which fully-ordained monastics, and novices, acknowledge and remedy their infractions of vows through communally confessing their breaches and reciting the *Prātimokṣasūtra*; alternatively, the term can also refer to when lay people take the eight lay precepts for the duration of the full-moon or new-moon day.[138] But here this typical communal monastic practice is yoked specifically to Buddha Amoghapāśa and other elements that lift it into a resolutely tantric environment. For instance, the material specifications for the rite are to arrange the *maṇḍala*, receptacle image, and so forth of the *Tamer of Beings* (*'gro 'dul*) on the eighth or fifteenth day of the waxing lunar month, primarily on the four holy days of the Conqueror, or on the new moon of the waning period; lay out offerings, primarily offering lamps, in front of this altar; and wash one's body with blessed water, cense it with incense, and don clean clothes.[139]

The liturgical stipulations are to first "carefully perform by oneself the rite of restoration and purification, as it appears elsewhere," then

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[137] Ibid., 295.1.

[138] Krang dbyi sun, et al. 1993: 3029. For editions and studies of the *poṣadha* chapter of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayavastu*, see Hu-von Hinüber, 1994; and, more recently, Lueritthikul 2015. This chapter forms the basis for Tibetan understandings of this important monastic confession and restoration rite.

[139] Ibid., 295.1–.3.

perform the liturgy of the *Tamer of Beings*.[140] When doing the front-generation visualization practice of the *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*, the position of Avalokiteśvara, who is usually in front of the central deity Akṣobhya, is exchanged with Amoghapāśa, yet another form of Avalokiteśvara who normally stands on the southwestern petal of the surrounding eight-petal lotus.[141] One is to imagine that from a dot on the forehead of Amoghapāśa, now standing front and center, pours ambrosia the color of moonlight; as soon as it touches one's body one is cleansed of all the stains of obscurations, and the seed of awakening is planted within.[142]

For best results the liturgy directs practitioners to combine this contemplative exercise with the recitation of the long *dhāraṇī* of Amoghapāśa that appears in the *Collection of Tantras* (*rgyud 'bum*).[143] However, the text reassures, if due to time constraints recitation of the long *dhāraṇī* is not feasible, the main session can consist of reciting only the essence mantra. In the breaks between sessions, we are told, one is to do the concluding procedures, such as offering, praise, confession, and the rest, and apply oneself to proper conduct. Then one is to replenish the offerings and repeat the procedure until three such sessions have been performed for the day.[144]

The procedure also suggests fasting for a while if one's constitution permits. If it does not permit, the text suggests not rising from one's seat, or relying for support on the ritual purity of abstaining from afternoon meals, as well as meat, garlic, onion, and other ritually impure ingredients.[145]

The section concludes by adding that this technique is praised as important in "new translation *tantra*s and *kalpa*s (*gsar 'gyur gyi rgyud dang rtog pa*), and is thus taken to be a vital practice by the Sa skya monastery of Zhwa lu, among other monastic institutions.[146] The benefits of performing and promoting this practice are then extolled with a closing citation:

> Training in such repeatedly
> Will pacify illness and demonic disturbances, increase lifespan and merit,
> Expand luster, extend youth,

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140 Ibid., 295.3.

141 Ibid., 295.4.

142 Ibid., 295.6–296.1.

143 This probably refers to *Amoghapāśahṛdayanāmadhāraṇī* (*Don yod zhags pa'i snying po zhes bya ba'i gzungs*), Tōh. 683, *bKa' 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 91 (*rgyud 'bum*, *Ba*), pp. 1022–1027. For a Sanskrit edition and translation, see Meisezahl 1962.

144 *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 296.1–.3.

145 Ibid., 296.3.

146 Ibid., 293.3–.4.

And effortlessly give rise to renunciation and compassion.

Even beings who have committed the deeds of immediate retribution
Will surely attain the heavens in the next life.
One should promulgate the activity of this Dharma practice
To those of suitable fortune in the future.

Those who so promulgate it
Will become children of Avalokiteśvara.[147]

While much can be said about this practice, perhaps its most striking feature is the integration of a regular communal monastic ritual into a tantric ritual and contemplative framework, replete with tantric contemplative practice, mantra recitation, and the corresponding material setting of *maṇḍala* altar, offerings, and the like. "Training" here most obviously references ethical training in the vows of the monastic order, breaches of which the communal *poṣadha* rite is aimed at addressing and purifying. The monastic goal of maintaining ethical purity and effecting ethical purification is echoed here in the material practice—common to the *kriyā yoga* class of *tantra*s to which the *Amoghapāśa*-related practices are often said to belong in Tibet[148]—of observing physical and dietary hygiene and purity by, for instance, washing the body, donning clean clothes, and abstaining from the consumption of meat, alcohol, and other "polluting" substances.[149] In this regard, the "liberation through training" technique outlined here appears to draw from an earlier Indian Buddhist precedent—the *Amoghapāśapoṣadhavidhyāmnāya*, attributed to the Kashmiri scholar Śākyaśrībhadra (1127–1225)—which similarly integrates *poṣadha* ritual practice into a tantric context featuring Amoghapāśa.[150]

In terms of the senses, however, there seems to be little that is unique in this technique, save the sensorial aspects common to much tantric practice of visualizing dynamic photic imagery and transacting with material offerings keyed to the senses. The ways in which this

147 Ibid., 293.4–.6: *'di ltar yang yang bslab pa yis: nad gdon zhi zhing tshe bsod 'phel: kha dog rgyas shing lang tsho dar: nges 'byung snying rje rtsol med skye: mtshams med byas pa'i 'gro ba yang: phyi ma mtho ris nges par thob: la 'ongs skal par 'tshams pa yi: chos 'di phrin las spel bar bya: de ltar spel ba'i skyes bu de: spyan ras gzigs dbang sras su 'gyur :*

148 See, for instance, the Tibetan imperial period catalogue, *Lhan dkar ma*, where the principal Amoghapāśa-related *tantra*, the *Amoghapāśakalparāja*, is classified as a *kriyā tantra*. Cf. Herrmann-Pfandt 2009: 138. The enduring Tibetan tendency to classify Amoghapāśa-related-tantric material as *kriyā tantra* can also be observed in the catalogues of the various *bKa' 'gyur* collections.

149 For more on the role of Indian Buddhist *kriyā yoga tantra*s as inspiration and source material for Tibetan Treasure revelations, see Mayer 1994, 2007, 2017, and 2019.

150 *Don yod zhags pa'i gso sbyong gi cho ga'i man ngag*, Tōh. 2864, *bsTan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 37 (*rgyud 'grel*, *Nu*), pp. 741–743.

technique effects practitioners, moreover, seems to leave behind the sensory emphasis of the other techniques. No special object is prepared and consecrated to impact those who might have sensory contact with it. Instead, "liberation through training" follows the pattern of standard tantric *sādhana* practice, with the only twist being the focus on the monastic rite of *poṣadha*.

But the range of effects promised through the performance of this *poṣadha* rite nonetheless follows the pattern seen thus far. In this respect, the practice is no ordinary *poṣadha* rite: it cures illness, ensures longevity and a beautiful complexion, generates renunciation and compassion, and even promises rebirth in the heavens, even for especially heinous sinners. The "training" aspect, in this practice's promise to deliver "liberation through training," is, in this sense, no ordinary Buddhist technique to form ethical subjects through the cultivation of proper paradigms of conduct and deportment. Rather, it presents ways to circumvent prolonged cultivation, even as it marks itself as centered foremost on the ethical monastic "training" implied in the *poṣadha* rite.

2.i. Liberation through smelling

The next section returns us squarely to the domain of the senses with instructions for the material and ritual preparation of the technique of "liberation through smelling the incense of Padmoṣṇīṣa" (*padma gtsug tor gyi bdug spos tshor grol*).[151] Beginning with the material specifications for the preparation of the incense, one is to take as the main ingredient the leaves of juniper trees (*shug pa*) that have grown in sacred places (*gnas*), mix the leaves with as much powdered white and red sandalwood, and agarwood (*a ga ru*) as one can procure, place the powder in a jewel-encrusted vessel, and arrange the vessel on the middle of an altar platform. On a short platform raised above the vessel of powdered ingredients one is to arrange a vase filled with the "25 contents[152]," adorned with a spout and a band, and tied with a *dhāṛaṇī* cord. In front of this should be laid out a full arrangement of offerings.[153]

The liturgical preparation once again requires performance of the *Tamer of Beings* ritual (*'gro 'dul gyi las*).[154] But once one has reached the section in the liturgy for the front-generation visualization and recitation, the visualization should focus instead on the vase and its

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[151] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 296.6.
[152] These are in all likelihood identical to the "25 substances" outlined above.
[153] Ibid, 296.6–297.2.
[154] Ibid., 297.2.

features. One imagines that, although the outside is a jewel vase, the inside is a celestial mansion filled with a current of ambrosia, at the center of which is the eight-petal lotus of the standard *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. Here, however, one exchanges the position of Avalokiteśvara, who, we may recall, is usually the deity in front of Akṣobhya in the *maṇḍala*'s central configuration, with Padmoṣṇīṣa, who normally stands on the northwestern petal of the surrounding eight-petal lotus. The liturgy then directs the practitioner to consecrate the vase, performing all the stages, from the invitation of the actual *jñānasattva* Padmoṣṇīṣa to fuse with the *samayasattva* Padmoṣṇīṣa, all the way up to the offering and praise to the newly-consecrated vase.[155]

Practitioners are then to hold the *dhāraṇī* cord, while directing at the vase the following recitation and visualization (*gmigs pa gsal btab*):

> Based on the *vajra dhāraṇī* cord,
> The mantra garland from one's awakened heart (*rang gi thugs*),
> The divine assembly is invoked to enter the vase,
> And a stream of ambrosia flows from the awakened body
> And thereby becomes ambrosia that purifies evil deeds and obscurations.
>
> It fills the vase, overflows from the spout,
> And dissolves into the *vajra* incense [below],
> Thereby quelling the bad rebirths,
> And the suffering of *saṃsāra*
> For whomever smells it.[156]

This is immediately followed by the main portion of each session, the recitation of Padmoṣṇīṣa's mantra: *oṁ padmoṣṇīṣa vimale hūṁ phaṭ*.[157] The instructions stipulate that the measure of the approach stage is taught to be 100,000 recitations, but that the benefits will be greater the more mantras are recited; nonetheless, it adds, 10,000 should be the minimum.[158] At the end of the session, we are told, the practitioner should recite as many as possible of the mantras of the other main deities and entourage deities of the *maṇḍala*, then perform offering and praise, and make supplications.[159] Each session should end by imagining that "the deities melt into light and thereby become the same taste as the stream of water in the vase," sealing the practice

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155 Ibid., 297.2–.6.

156 Ibid., 297.6–298.2: *rang gi thugs nas sngags kyi phreng: rdo rje'i gzungs thag la brten nas: bum pa'i nang zhugs lha tshogs bskul: sku las bdu rtsi'i rgyun babs pas: sdig sgrib sbyong ba'i bdud rtir gyur: de nyid 'phyur zhing kha nas lud: rdo rje'i bdug pa la thim pas: gang gis tshor bas ngan song dang: 'khor ba'i sdug bsngal zhi bar 'gyur:*

157 Ibid., 298.2.

158 Ibid., 298.2–.3.

159 Ibid., 298.3.

with dedication and aspirations.[160] The liturgy calls for three such sessions daily, until the requisite number of mantra recitations is complete.[161]

Once complete the practitioner is instructed to sprinkle the incense with the vase water until it is soaked, rub the mixture together, and dry it in the shade.[162] Uses for the incense are outlined next: the text instructs to mix it with other incense, and with substances used in *bsang* and *gsur* rites, such that it wafts into the nostrils of all beings—humans, animals, and, by implication, the deceased.[163] The text also includes details about its healing properties: the instructions assure that it is proven in experience that this incense is far more beneficial than any other mantra or incense for those afflicted with illness and demonic interference. Additionally, the instruction continues, it is also an incense that can benefit beings on the verge of death.[164]

Following the pattern of the other liberations, the section concludes with a verse citation extolling its benefits:

> Through just smelling its fragrance
> Social pollution will be dispelled, health will be restored, the faculties will become lucid,
> Evil deeds and obscurations will be pacified, obstructers will flee,
> And, ultimately, one will acquire the potential for awakening.[165]

This verse is punctuated with a call to promote this technique: "Since it is praised extensively in the *Amoghapāśakalparāja* (*Don zhags rtog pa zhib mo*), one should confidently encourage its practice."[166]

All told, the "liberation through smelling" practice outlined here by Kong sprul follows a pattern quite similar to that of the "liberation through tasting": medicinal substances are gathered and infused with the agency of awakened beings through ritual proceedings; and the range of effects promised for those who "sense" (*tshor ba*) it extends

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160 Ibid., 298.3–.4: *lha rnams 'od du zhu bas bum pa'i chu rgyun dang rog cig gyur/*

161 Ibid., 298.4.

162 Ibid., 298.4–.5.

163 Ibid., 298.5. *bsang* and *gsur* refers to two different kinds of popular smoke offering rites for propitiating not just the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, but also the deceased, capricious local spirits, and other beings with which one has relationships of past "karmic debt". For more details on *bsang*, see Karmay 1998: 380–412. For more on *gsur*, see Panglung 1985.

164 Ibid., 298.5–.6.

165 Ibid., 298.6–299.1: *'di yi dri tshor tsam gyis kyang: grin sel khams dwangs dang po gsal: sdig sgrib zhi zhing dgon bgegs 'bros/ mthar thug byang chub rigs can 'gyur:*

166 Ibid., 299.1. *Don yod pa'i zhags pa'i cho ga zhib mo'i rgyal po*, Tōh. 683, *bKa' 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 92 (*rgyud 'bum*, *Mu*), pp. 3–756. For an incomplete Sanskrit edition, see *Amoghapāśakalparāja* 2001–.

from the medical register of healing, through the karmic register of the purification of evil deeds and obscurations, all the up to the ultimate register of poising one for complete awakening. Also like the liberation through tasting, and several other of the techniques outlined thus far, one needn't have any special altruistic intention, devotion, or any other refined subjective quality to feel its effects, whether they set in immediately, or only in the next life.

But of particular emphasis in this technique are the benefits believed to accrue to the ill, and even to the terminally ill, through sensory contact with its medicinal fragrance. Kong sprul appeals to "experience" (*nyams myong*) here to extol this incense as more beneficial than any other medicinal incense used for the treatment of illness. He thus advocates incorporating it into other rituals—such as *bsang* and *gsur*—which center on the burning of substances and the offering of their smoke for a range of purposes. The use of this incense for the dead and dying also figures in this regard, although the precise impact of the fragrance on the future lives of the deceased is not spelled out here with any degree of precision.

2.j. Liberation through making offerings

The final of the eleven techniques consists of material and ritual specifications for "liberation through making offerings," specifically, "making offerings associated with Vajrasāra" (*rdo rje snying po'i mchod sbyin spyad grol*).[167] As these instructions make clear, however, the offerings stipulated here revolve around "burnt offerings" (*me mchod*) and "water offerings" (*chu sbyin*) in particular.[168]

The subsection on "burnt offerings" comes first and is itself divided into an elaborate form and an abridged daily practice. The elaborate form begins with material specifications resembling standard *sbyin bsreg* (*homa*) rites.[169] The preparation (*sbyor ba*) requires the construction of a hearth, round in shape, corresponding to the act of pacifying from among the four tantric activities.[170] At the hub is to be drawn an eight-petal lotus marked with a *vajra*, a rim, a perimeter, a stone enclosure, a rosary, and so forth, according to the "common procedure."[171]

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[167] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 299.1.

[168] Ibid., 299.2.

[169] For more details on the history of burnt offering rites in India and Tibet, see Bentor 2000. For an English translation of a Tibetan burnt offering liturgy, see Sherpa Tulku and Perrott 1987.

[170] Ibid., 299.2. For a discussion of how the four tantric activities serve as an organizational rubric for structuring the material and liturgical details of burnt offerings rites, see Gentry 2017: 336–341.

[171] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 299.2–.3.

Kindling is to be piled on it in a round shape. To the right of the practitioner should be placed two containers of water and offerings. To his left should be placed ghee, and seven or twenty-one pieces of firewood, as appropriate, which have all been doused with milk, along with sesame seeds. Ladles for scooping and pouring, an "action vase (*las bum*)," and preliminary oblations are also to be assembled for use.[172]

The main part, the liturgical directive, requires the practitioner to first bless the action vase, and its purifying waters, with the mantra of Amṛtakuṇḍali; cast the preliminary oblations; and do the liturgy from refuge and *bodhicitta* up to self-generation and recitation.[173] The officiant is to then bless the offering substances, and, according to the liturgy, touch the substances to be burned with the seal of a one-pointed *vajra*, cleanse them with *oṁ svāhā*, and then incant in turn the firewood, butter, and sesame seeds with specific mantras, accompanied by visualizations.[174] The fire is then to be lit and doused with the blessed water using *kuśa* glass.[175]

The front-generation deity yoga procedure outlined here follows the pattern observed thus far:[176] the central object of the rite, this time the hearth and its blazing fire, becomes the focal point of a series of contemplative visualizations, mantra and liturgical recitations, and actions, by which it is imagined and treated as none other than the *maṇḍala* of the *Tamer of Beings*, but with the Buddha Vajrasāra, whose position in the *maṇḍala* is usually on the northeastern lotus petal surrounding the central deities, standing front and center in the place of Avalokiteśvara. Then, as the ritual practitioner pours into the fire each substance—starting with butter, followed by the pieces of firewood, and then sesame seeds—he or she punctuates each pour with a mantra specific to each substance. Simultaneously, the practitioner imagines that as the materials burn in the fire they become a stream of ambrosia, which dissolves into the mouths of the deities in the *maṇḍala*, thus pleasing them with stainless bliss. As the deities become satiated with the perfectly potent fragrance and taste of the white ambrosia of wisdom, moon light shines forth from their bodies and, striking all beings—oneself and all others—the light purifies and cleanses them of all thoughts, obscurations, and habitual tendencies. The ritual officiant is then to recite the mantra *oṁ āḥ hrīḥ hūṁ vajrasāra pramardana sarvakarma āvaraṇa śuddhe svāhā*, however many hundreds

[172] Ibid., 299.3–.4.
[173] Ibid., 299.4.
[174] Ibid., 299.4–.5.
[175] Ibid., 300.1.
[176] Ibid., 300.1–301.3.

or thousands of times as possible, punctuated with supplications of the rite's desired aim.[177] The rite concludes with offering, praise, and confession, before the *jñānasattva* departs into space, and the *samayasattva* melts into light and dissolves indivisibly into the practitioner.[178] The rite is capped off with dedication, aspirations, and auspicious verses.

After the conclusion of the rite, the practitioner is instructed to gather up the ash and deposit it into a large river, whereby its presence will purify all beings that dwell therein of all their obscurations.[179]

The abridged daily practice of fire offerings[180] pares down the above material specifications to setting a fire and gathering sesame seeds. The elaborate liturgy, moreover, is reduced to visualizing that out of emptiness emerges Vajrasāra—seated in the center of the fire, now equated with the fire of wisdom—and imagining that all one's evil deeds, obscurations, and habitual tendencies dissolve into the sesame seeds, which, with the mantra *oṁ āḥ hūṁ*, transform into ambrosia. As the practitioner offers them into the mouth of Vajrasāra *qua* fire, the deities of the *maṇḍala*, now seated in Vajrasāra's heart, become satiated with great, undefiled bliss, and, having purified the evil deeds and obscurations of the practitioner and all others, they bestow on them all accomplishments (*mngos grub*, *siddhi*). After the practitioner offers sesame seeds to the fire according to this procedure twenty-one times, or as many more times as possible, accompanied with the mantra given above, the deities melt into light and dissolve into him. The abridged rite concludes with dedication and aspirations, and with the promise that performing this technique will purify obscurations, and pacify obstructers and obstacles.

The water offering is likewise simple.[181] Its material preparations only require one to arrange clean water containing a small ball of dough in a clean vessel during the early morning hours. The liturgical operation is also rather basic. After the preparation of taking refuge and reciting the *bodhicitta* aspiration, the practitioner is to visualize that in the sky in front of him is Avalokiteśvara, in the form of Ārya Vajrasāra, surrounded by an assembly of buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, *ḍākinī*s and protectors, with the demonic obstructers, the six classes of beings, and, specifically, all the "guests" of one's karmic debtors situated below them. One imagines next that from emptiness emerges the syllable *bhrūṁ*, which transforms into a vast jewel vase,

177 Ibid., 301.3–.4.
178 Ibid., 301.4–.5.
179 Ibid., 301.5–.6.
180 Ibid., 301.6–302.5.
181 Ibid., 302.5–303.3.

now coterminous with the water vessel. Inside it is one's own body, which melts into light and transforms into an oblation construed as an ocean of ambrosia. After then saying the mantra syllables *oṁ āḥ hūṁ* three times, the practitioner images that his mind transforms into Khasarpaṇi Avalokiteśvara and that the offering of his body, in the form of the dough ball, has become an offering to the "guests" of all karmic debtors. The practitioner is to then offer the vase water, with its dough ball, while reciting the mantra *namaḥ sarva tathāgata avalokite oṁ sambhara sambhara* as many times as possible. The practitioner then makes the supplication for the rite's intended aim:

oṁ

You who destroys all evil deeds and obscurations—
Ārya Vajrasāra
And assembly of objects of refuge worthy of offerings—
Accept my body, the oblation of ambrosia!

Grant your blessings! Purify evil deeds and obscurations!
Bestow accomplishments! Dispel obstacles!
All demonic obstructers, spirits, and the six classes of beings,
And especially all guests—karmic debtors—

Eat this stainless ambrosia!
Purify all karmic debt!
May all harm-doers and pernicious beings be pacified
And endowed with the mind of awakening![182]

The practitioner then meditates in a state of emptiness, without observing the guests to which he has made offerings and the materials offered. The practice concludes with dedication and aspirations.[183]

The section on "liberation through making offerings" as a whole concludes with a verse citation on its "purpose" (*dgos pa*), which corresponds to the "benefits" citations in the concluding passages of the previous ten techniques:

This perfects the accumulations and cheats death.
It purifies general evil deeds and obscurations, and, specifically,
The obscuration of consuming offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sgrib*)

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[182] Ibid., 303.3–.6: *oṁ: sdig sgrib thams cad 'joms mdzad pa'i: 'phags pa rdo rje snying po dang: skyabs gnas mchod 'os rgya mtsho'i tshogs: bdag lus bdud rtsi'i gtor ma bzhes: byin gyis rlobs shig sdig sgrib sbyongs: dngos grub stsol cig bar chad sol: gdon bgegs 'byung po rigs drug dang: khyad par lan chags mgron rnams kun: zag med bdud rtsi 'di gsol la: lan chags bu lon byang bar mdzod: gnod 'tshe gdug rtsub kun zhi zhing: byang chub sems dang ldan par shog:*

[183] Ibid., 303.6–304.1.

and negative karmic debt.
Therefore, one should perform this regularly.[184]

This method, the instructions add in conclusion, is especially praised for purifying [the consumption of] offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sbyong*).

In the "liberation through offering" we thus have a seemingly regular set of instructions for the performance of the pacifying variety of the burnt offering rite, and a simple water offering rite, yoked to the specific purpose of purifying karmic debt that the clergy is believed to accrue from partaking of offerings of food and wealth donated by the devout. This category of karmic debt is clearly regarded to have particularly egregious consequences when it ripens in this and future lives.

Coding this technique as something that can bring "liberation" seems to signal only liberation from the negative effects of this unusually heavy form of karma, although the final statements about the rites' benefits opens it up into a more positive and generalized set of goals, inclusive of longevity, accumulation of merit, purification of karma, and even the transformation of pernicious karmic debtors into compassionate bodhisattvas. Moreover, presented alongside these goals as side effects is the ability of the contagious power of their residual substances of ash and water to purify the negative karma and obscurations of all the beings with which they come in contact, regardless of their karmic links, or even their engagement of intentionality.

3. Concluding remarks

This paper has considered how Kong sprul's 19th century liturgical text—*An Awesome Ocean*—details eleven different techniques that purport to confer "liberation" primarily through preparations of and encounters with especially potent sensory objects. In exploring these techniques a number of noteworthy features have come to the fore that shed light on the role of sensory experience in popular Buddhist practice in Tibet. The initial gesture here of tracing the pedigree of these eleven practices has also shown that they are each connected to earlier revelations in Tibet, and still earlier practices prevalent in India, some stretching back to mainstream Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist rites and material religious practices.

But *An Awesome Ocean* more specifically reflects the prior integration of these techniques into tantric ritual frameworks, a

[184] Ibid., 304.1: *'dis ni tshogs rdzogs 'chi ba bslu: sdig sgrib spyi dang khyad par du: dkor sgrib lan chags ngan pa sbyong: de phyir rgyun du brtson par bya:*

process which by all indications was already well underway in Indian Buddhist communities prior to the importation of Buddhist traditions to Tibet. Kong sprul's packaging of these eleven techniques together—integrating them within the framework of the eleven-deity *maṇḍala* of *Tamer of Beings*—and his extension to all eleven of the promise to confer "liberation," appears to be his own unique contribution to this process. Indeed, Kong sprul's eleven liberations, when viewed as a continuation of the systemization of Buddhist material practices first set in motion in India, and then made more evident in Tibet by the coinage of the rubric of four liberations, and its gradual expansion to six, and eight liberations, stands out as the most extensive rubric of its kind.

Yet the liturgy clearly shows that despite Kong sprul's success in integrating these practices to an eleven-deity *maṇḍala*, each technique is to be practiced separately, not in tandem; hence, the central deity of the *maṇḍala* changes position according to the specifications of each technique. Moreover, to reach eleven modes of liberation and thereby match a technique of liberation to each deity of the *maṇḍala* seems to have required Kong sprul to enlist practices that do not fit very neatly the typical pattern and material ethos of this set of practices as a whole. We thus find included here a technique for liberation through cultivating a vision of Amitābha's pure land and the firm resolve to be reborn there—otherwise part of standard Mahāyāna pure land-related practice. Although Kong sprul follows established tradition in thoroughly embedding this technique in a tantric liturgical framework,[185] it nonetheless stands out among the eleven techniques in not strictly requiring the use, preparation, and/or consecration of a potent material object to serve as focal point. Nonetheless, it is the object-like other-power of Buddha Amitābha's compassion and previous aspiration that is the primary cause of efficacy here, even as the liturgy requires practitioners to actively attune their minds to the reality of his pure land through visualization, recitation, and gesture.

Further along these lines, we also encountered the technique of liberation through training in the restoration and purification of monastic vows—the practice of *poṣadha*—which had been an integral part of communal Buddhist monastic life from a very early period. Kong sprul appears to follow Indian Buddhist tradition in embedding *poṣadha* in a resolutely tantric framework, even as he newly integrates it within the *Tamer of Beings maṇḍala*. Nonetheless, the liberation through cultivating is similar to the liberation through training in terms of the private and immaterial scope of its efficacy—neither technique calls for the production and/or consecration of a power

[185] Halkias 2013.

object that promises to have widespread efficacy for entire communities.

In contrast, the nine remaining techniques each centers on the use, preparation, and/or consecration of a sacred object that becomes imbued with sufficient contagious power to positively impact everything and everywhere with which it comes into contact. In this sense they are resolutely public in scope. When taking stock of the ritual preparations of their featured objects, all nine of these techniques appear to be rooted in a combination of Indian Buddhist consecration rituals, tantric grimoires, and tantric medical practices, but with a few important distinctions.

The objects that feature in these nine techniques are each composed of a combination of ingredients, some of which are thought to have their own intrinsic power, and others of which are believed to accrue power through their preparation and consecration in ritual settings. Indeed, with few notable exceptions, these objects are manufactured, not revealed. In other words, they are by and large not "Treasure substances," per se, but objects to be manufactured based on the directives of "Treasure teachings." So while these nine techniques each features some object or another that acquires power and acts on people and environments, only a few key ingredients—relics, medicinal substances, deity images, *dhāraṇī*s, mantras, etc.—are presented as embodying the intrinsic power so typical of Treasure substances. Human beings still have to augment their power through intentionally focusing cognitive, vocal, and physical activity toward them in ritual settings.

The methods by which they do so feature in shorthand form many of the elements of standard consecration rites, which themselves share the basic pattern of tantric liturgical practice: objects are visualized as buddhas (*samayasattva*), *actual* buddhas (*jñānasattva*) are invoked and merged with the objects visualized as buddhas through a focused choreography of visualization, mantra, *mudrā*, and material transactions; and finally, the objects are treated as actual buddhas, becoming focal points of veneration and worship.[186] Ultimately this treatment enables objects and their wielders to extend the agency of the empowering awakened presence that inhabits them to everything and anything with which they come in contact. In this way, these nine techniques adumbrate the diverse sensory and cognitive media by which awakened agency can be most effectively distributed in the world to positively impact others.

But alongside the manufacture and consecration of particularly revered objects, such as statues, *stūpa*s, buddha images, relic pills, and

[186] For an excellent study of consecration rituals in Tibet, see Bentor 1996.

sacred circular diagrams, we find the consecration of other substances and objects such as sand, water, food, the hearth, fragrances, and fire, which are not typically marked as especially venerable. The empowerment of such seemingly quotidian substances to act on beings and environments is something these techniques share with those found in the grimoire and medical sections of several Indian Buddhist *tantra*s, where the entire phenomenal world and all its myriad substances are construed as intrinsically sacred; through their various permutations and combinations, in consultation with associated *materia medica* and *materia sacra*, they become primed for use in healing, protection, destruction, and other such operations.

These Indian Buddhist tantric techniques, however, generally confine the range of their efficacy to pragmatic affairs. There are some notable exceptions to this general pattern, which do mention the purification of karma, but even in such instances the fruition of "liberation" rarely if ever figures.[187] In Kong sprul's liturgy, however, objects' scope of efficacy is broadened beyond the pragmatic sphere so typical of tantric grimoires and remedies to explicitly include the loftier goals of purification of negative karma, positive rebirth, and liberation from *saṁsāra* as a whole. Nonetheless, the efficacy of most of these objects is accretive—that is, each object, while keyed specifically as a means of liberation, also subsumes the entire range of pragmatic and karmic goals as positive side effects of sensory contact with it. In this sense, the techniques, taken as a whole, broaden the usual sense of liberation as liberation from *saṃsāra* to include freedom from illness, negative circumstances, particularly difficult karmic effects, and the lower realms. In this way, the explicit promise that such things are powerful enough to specifically confer liberation, and not just from pragmatic misfortunes, but also from the effects of negative deeds, and even from *saṃsāra* in its entirety, appears to be a particularly Tibetan extension and formalization of a similar strain of thought that had already been prevalent in Indian Buddhist circles. We have seen, moreover, that the objects are not identical in this regard. Instead, the liturgy displays the tendency to frame each object as appropriate for addressing a specific range of effects, even as considerable overlap is observable in each case, and, more importantly, the whole range of pragmatic, karmic, and soteriological registers is integrated in each technique.

Another accretive aspect of these techniques, beyond their range of efficacy, is how they reach their intended goals. Despite the

[187] See, for instance, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan's defense of the Indian Buddhist pedigree of liberation through the senses practices, as presented in Gentry 2017: 171–290.

demarcation of these techniques of liberation into seemingly tidy categories, each according to a specific sensory medium—seeing, hearing, tasting, etc.—the boundaries between them tends to be porous. This porousness is especially evident with substances, pills, liquids and the like that liberate through tasting, drinking, and so forth. Such substances can, for instance, sometimes also liberate through merely touching, wearing, smelling, and even hearing about them. The power of these substances, moreover, also seeps into the persons who discover or prepare them, and into the places in which they were first discovered, and later ritually treated and distributed.

The operative principle of efficacy in such cases is clearly physical contact, contiguity, and contagion. Indeed, as Kong sprul describes them in the colophon of his liturgy, they are "methods that lead to permanent bliss all who have contact with them."[188] The key passage here, worded as "all who have contact," renders the Tibetan phrase *'brel tshad*, literally, the "full range, measure, or extent" of "contact, or connection." Simply stated, the efficacy of such objects is not limited to a single medium. And their potency is contagious—it spreads to whomever, whatever, and wherever they have contact, no matter the sensory medium involved.

This logic of contagion poises these objects to act as powerful focal points of communal action, even as their efficacy rarely requires direct intentionality to be felt. Thus, although the concerted intentionality of ritual specialists is clearly paramount in the preparation of such objects, the role of intentionality for the wider population who would experience their positive effects is only key in a few instances, and peripheral or non-existent in most others. Through simply living, sensing—and dying—in environments saturated with these specially prepared, positioned, and distributed reliquaries, sounds, pills, sands, waters, amulets, smells, and so forth, entire communities—human and non-human—can hope to feel some respite from the pragmatic misfortunes that beset them in this life, and gain some purchase on their prospects for the next. The promise of "liberation" from *saṃsāra*, or, at the very least, sowing the seed for such in some distant future, orients and structures this set of goals within the soteriological framework of mainstream Buddhist doctrine. More importantly, perhaps, it also ensures, as Kong sprul puts it in his verses that close the liturgy, that "everyone, high and low, is brought benefit."[189] In sum, Kong sprul's liturgy presents a set of practices that positively utilizes the fullest possible range of sensory experience, yoking this to

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[188] *Ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*, 340.4–.5: /*'brel tshad gtan bder 'khrid pa'i thabs*/

[189] Ibid., 304.5: /*mchog dman kun la phan thogs pa*/

cognitive contemplative exercises and other features of Buddhist training, all with the express goal of touching the lives of all beings—providing pragmatic help, karmic purification, or spiritual refinement, as the case may be—through any kind of sensory or cognitive link, regardless of the medium involved, or even the intentionality of the experiencer. In Kong sprul's liturgy we thus find a set of Buddhist practices thoroughly centered on the sensorium of sentient life.

It is hoped that this presentation and analysis of a sensory-focused set of practices whose enduring popularity among Himalayan Buddhists can be readily witnessed upon even a casual visit to Himalayan Buddhist communities might help attune scholars of religion to the richness and depth with which some Buddhist traditions positively enlist sensory experiences with captivating objects in shaping and transforming sensibilities.

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