

# THE RANGJUNG YESHE LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL

རང་རྒྱུང་ཡེ་ཤེས་སྒྲོབ་སྒྲིབ་གི་སྒྲུབ་སྤྱོད་རྒྱུ་ཚུལ་དུས་དེབ།



FALL SEMESTER ■ 2015

སྒོ་ཁྲི་སྒྲོབ་དུས། ■ ༢༠༡༥

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS དཀར་ཆག



## NEPALI བལ་བོའི་སྐད།

- अन्तरमनको द्वन्द – के हो जीवन? (WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION) BY LAXMI BAJRACHARYA
- बौद्ध दर्शनमा प्रतिपादित बुद्धत्व प्राप्तिको उपाय BY ACHARYA SONAM SHERPA



## TAMANG མཐའ་དམངས་སྐད།

- ओस्सोन पाङ्गे BY AKKA TAMANG



## TIBETAN བོད་ཡིག་གི་ཚཱ།

- TOMORROW BY ARI LOBSANG སང་ཉིན། ཨ་རི་ལྷོ་བཟང་གིས།



## PRAYER མྱོན་ལམ་གསོལ་འདེབས།

- HOMAGE TO LORD JIGTEN SUMGON BY AARON BASSKIN



## POETRY ལྷན་ཚཱ།

POROUS BELLY BY JACK deTAR

20 RUPEE POEM BY JAMES HOPKINS

RACING PAST CALIFORNIAN SAVANNAH BY LAMA GERRY PRINDIVILLE

MUMBLINGS OF A BEGGAR BY ANONYMOUS

GREEN HILLS & MUDDY WATERS BY ROBERT OFFNER

A COLLECTION OF POEMS BY AARON BASSKIN

UNTITLED BY E.G

PASHUPATINATH BY E.G

HAIKUS BY JOEL HARDIN

MY GIUDECCA ACROSS THE WAY BY JOEL HARDIN



## PROSE ལྷན་ཅུ་མ།

-[[Title Removed under the Authority of the Central Censorship Committee  
in Accordance with Article 69.3]] BY GERD KLINTSCHAR

- The Impossibility of Translation by Shirreen Patell
- Creator of All That is Been Gone Through by Sujeet Sharma
- Falling Leaves—An Analogy of a Randomness by Sujeet Sharma
- SKY AS SKY BY ROBERT OFFNER



## ESSAY དབྱེད་ཅུ་མ།

- SACRED TEXTS AS A SPIRITUAL TEACHER BY ERIK PEMA KUNSANG
- AN EXCERPT FROM: "A HOLISTIC THEORY OF NON-DUAL UNION: THE EIGHT KARMAPA'S MAHAMUDRA VISION AS REACTION, RE-APPROPRIATION, AND RESOLUTION" BY JOSEPH FARIA
- MUSING ON THE ORIGINS OF TIBETAN CEREMONIAL MUSIC: YANG BY MIHAI POPEAN



## TRANSLATION བསྐྱར་ཅུ་མ།

- A SONG BY SHABKAR TSOKDRUG RANGDROL (TRANSLATED FROM THE TIBETAN BY PETER F. WOODS)
- THE ROOM BY PEMA TSEDEN (TRANSLATED FROM THE TIBETAN BY LOWELL COOK)
- ASPIRATION PRAYER OF THE COMPLETE FULFILLMENT OF THE PATH OF KALACHAKRA (TRANSLATED FROM THE TIBETAN BY ADAM LIDDLE)



## ART/PHOTOGRAPHY ཁུ་ཅུ་ལ་དང་བསྐྱབ་རེ་མ།

- UNTITLED BY SAGNIK DUTTA ROY
- GLIMPSES OF MANJUSRI BY SUVARAJ LAMA
- བྱ་ལྷན་ཁ་ཤོར། by ཨ་པ།
- What Goes Around Comes Around by Jordi Roig



## MUSING ON THE ORIGINS OF TIBETAN CEREMONIAL MUSIC: YANG BY MIHAI POPEAN

There are a few excellent digital repositories which do a great service to the preservation of textual artifacts of the *Vajrayāna* tradition as well as to the scholarly work at large. Such laborious efforts are just on time in their attempt to prevent another incalculable loss for humanity, similar only to disastrous precedents such as the burning down of the Library of Alexandria, Nalanda University, or the ancient manuscripts of Incan science. In this commendable attempt to preserve these artifacts, a great number of selfless and fully dedicated individuals make it possible for the following generations to glance once more upon the marvels of wisdom contained therein. Furthermore, those who courageously take upon the task of translating these texts into what seems to have become the lingua franca of our current wannabe global civilization are further bringing a contribution comparable only to that of the great *lotsawas* of the past. To what extent that comparison stands now and in the future depends on understanding the difference between a translator and “The Eyes of the World,” a topic that should take central stage along with other profound and far-reaching issues inherent in such efforts.

That being said, however excellent the written tradition is, and it truly is excellent judging by the positive impact it has had in the lives of so many of us and our contemporaries, the related living tradition is just as important if we are to further prevent gazing upon such treasures without the slightest clue of what their meaning is. There are examples of musical notation inscribed on ancient artifacts which nobody knows how to interpret, instruments depicted on ceramic pots that do not reveal any information on the tuning and scales used, and a great collection of medieval musical manuscripts that are still eluding transcription into current standard musical notation. Along the same lines is *Yang* (Wylie: *dbyangs*), the Tibetan ceremonial music notation which is known by just a handful of especially trained chant masters or *Umdze* (Wylie: *dbu mdzad*). Not only are the *Yang pechas* generally excluded from their related texts in digital repositories, but the knowledge to understand them is quite inaccessible to modern scholars and thus the efforts of preservation, not to mention the understanding of its importance, are virtually inexistent. Why should anyone care?

Everything associated with the *Vajrayāna* praxis, including what could be deemed as artistic expressions (e.g. gestures, dance, utterances, painting, music, use of instruments, ornaments, and implements), seems to have been designed to carry meaning that far transcends appearances. For instance, a *thangka* painting may look like an iconographical representation meant to be beautiful for the purpose of visual delight; when in fact, it is taught to be a timeless and perpetually-living set of instructions meant to be understood, contemplated, and put in practice at different levels of subtlety. In the same manner, patterns of motion in sacred *cham* (Wylie: *'cham*) dance encode instructions meant to be put into practice, while sacred music and its performance is designed to be a vehicle of profound transformation, a complete path in itself, endowed with practical instructions for self-emancipation. It is so much so, that the whole ceremonial ritual is in fact weaved around sound, and not the other way around.

*Yang* is an integral part of the ceremonial praxis in *Vajrayāna*, the importance of which cannot be emphasized enough. However, without a thorough scholarly assessment, such a

statement remains in the domain of opinion, trivializing *Yang*'s role in the perpetuation of *Vajrayāna* and as a vehicle for self-emancipation, without much substance beyond its functional aspect as a sound offering. In the same way in which tradition devoid of its sacred elements becomes a mindless habit, the musical ceremonial praxis of the *Vajrayāna* tradition is in danger if seen only as an optional addition to a ritual. A profound understanding of *Yang* praxis is instrumental in developing a panoramic view of the *Vajrayāna* tradition, and appears to be an essential means for attaining the goal of this vehicle.

The tantric tradition of *Vajrayāna* is adamant in maintaining a live and clear connection with the original Indian sources. In fact, this particular tendency was the reason for centuries of debate in regards to the legitimacy of certain lineages of transmission and practice. However, when it comes to *Yang*, its origins and true meaning seem to remain subject to vague speculation, leading to an unfortunate vacuum in terms of attested relevance. And this may not seem of particular concern until different streams of knowledge are discovered to unequivocally point to the same source: the sound.

The Great Padmasambhava of Orgyen, the father of *Vajrayāna*, was particularly skillful at weaving the complementary, but radically different in approach, traditions of *Sutrayāna*, *Tantrayāna*, and *Mantrayāna*, into an utterly complete system. The reason for this vastness in scope is inherent in the universality of the aspiration that gave it birth. Exclusive methods work for those who have a natural inclination towards them. Instead, what became known as *Vajrayāna* is based on the most inclusive praxis for attaining one's full potential, thus appearing as a vehicle of universal application. It is at the confluence of these rivers of knowledge expressed in aphorisms, *sādhana*s, and the view of natural liberation, that the sound reigns supreme in scope and application. In doubt?

Let us first examine *Mañjuśrī's Gātā* from *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* which states that both *Mañjuśrī* and *Avalokiteśvara* attained liberation by means of the *pervasive sound*: "I now submit to the World Honoured One / that all Buddhas in this world appear / to teach the most appropriate method / which consists in using pervasive sound. / The state of Samādhi can be / realized by means of hearing. / Thus was Avalokiteśvara freed from suffering. / Hail to the Regarder of sound . . . Oh you who [have achieved] the sound profound, / The seer of sound, of sound the purifier, . . . Reverently I declare to the Tathāgata / What Avalokiteśvara said: / When one dwells in quietude, / Rolls of drums from ten directions / Simultaneously are heard, / So hearing is complete and perfect. . . . The faculty of hearing, beyond creation / and annihilation, truly is permanent. . . . For the faculty of hearing is beyond / all thought, beyond both mind and body. . . . Avalokiteśvara did not practice / [i]t alone, because through it I also passed" (Luk 1963, 203-212).

If it is understood that this passage talks about both the Buddha of Compassion and the Buddha of Wisdom at the time they were still bodhisattvas, it gains great significance. The technical details of the *pervasive sound* praxis are not described. However, a glimpse at its dramatically profound implications is found in Padma Lingpa's *Exceedingly Concise Sadhana of Peaceful Guru Padmasambhava* in which is stated that "the indivisible union of winds and mantra is the sound of *nāda*" (Bieler 2008, 12). The meaning of this statement alone deserves its own treatise. However, for now it is important to signal that the relation between these two previous statements points to the explanation of what exactly the *sound of nāda* is. Also, of great importance is to note that the *nāda sound* is further named the *anāhata sound* in various Indian

sources (e.g. *Hatharaṭṇāvalī*, *Darśan Upaniṣad*, *Nāda Bindu Upaniṣad*) and *anāhata* is described as the heart chakra, which would point at this being the *heart sound*. While from a western perspective this statement may remain quite cryptic, if we understand that in the Indo-Tibetan tradition the heart is in fact the seat of the mind itself, the *anāhata sound* is then understood as the *sound of mind as such*, precisely of the ultimate essential nature from which everything arises. However, it this view sustained in the *Vajrayāna*?

Since *Vajrayāna* is tantric Buddhism *par excellence*, we should look into the tantras for clarification. Further investigation leads to the dissolution phase of *kyerim* (Wylie: *skyed rim*) practice in which everything ultimately exhausts into the... *nāda*, as the last visual element of the dissolution phase. This is a major pointer, but not the end of the journey, as the ultimate *nāda sound* is in fact devoid of any visual representation. Konchog Gyaltsen's *Regular Practice of Tara Called the Source of All Activities* states that the *nāda* itself, as the final visual element of the dissolution phase, slowly dissolves "into the Mahamudra state – the ordinary mind, . . . the nature of mind-as-such" which is the ultimate *sound of nāda*. Does this mean that there are more than one types of *nāda*?

In the *Vajrayāna* context, it is asserted that the "ordinary" mind is not the thinking intellect but the unborn, unelaborated, unfabricated, unadulterated, uncontrived, nature of mind itself. In other words, the "ordinary" is in fact that which is free of all delusion, the *mind as such* beyond intellect. The *mind as such* is the subject of the highest *Yoga Tantra*, *Atiyoga* or *Dzogchen* (Wylie: *rdzogs chen*), namely *Mantrayāna* in the 9-vehicle *Vajrayāna* system. Some would argue here about the difference, similarity, or superiority of *Dzogchen* and/or *Mahāmudrā*; I will leave such exercises in rhetoric and philosophy for another time; the journey of discovery does not end here or with any particular debate, as the ultimate dissolution of all phenomena leads to... sound again. This is not just any sound, but a very particular one as "Everywhere the sphere of the self-resounding roar of emptiness arises clearly" according to the *Yamantaka's Blazing Razor of Extreme Repelling* (Fry-Miller 39), which furthermore states that "Meditating on this self-arisen roar is the true mantra recitation! . . . It is none other than the extraordinary Dharma!" (Fry-Miller 67-88). The extraordinary Dharma is the *dharmakaya* itself, expressed as "sound beyond uttering or not" (Fry-Miller 127). In other words, all the sources discussed so far can be sublimated into the following sequence: the outer sound leads to the inner sound, which furthermore reveals the visual sound, eventually dissolving into the ultimate sound – the very "sound" of *śūnyatā*, or "emptiness," in the Indian tradition identified as *Nāda Brahmin*. Please note the four levels of sound or *nāda*, as we are going to meet them again.

This "sound of emptiness," described as the "roar of a hundred-thousand thunder claps," and discussed in the vast majority of higher tantras, is not a mere metaphor, but is taught as the Buddha nature itself, and is the subject of the root tantra of the most profound and esoteric set of instructions on the nature of mind. Climbing the ladder of tantric paths, we arrive ultimately at the seventeen tantras of the *Mengagde* (Wylie: *man ngag sde*), the secret oral instructions class of *Dzogchen*, of which the root tantra is *Drataljur Chenpo'i Gyü* (Wylie: *sgra thal 'gyur chen po 'i rgyud*), the Tantra of the Reverberation of Sound. Known under several interpretations such as "Direct Consequence of Sound," "Penetration of Sound," or "Transcendental Sound" Tantra, *Drataljur* asserts that sound as *Nāda Brahmin* is intrinsically connected to, the vehicle for, inherent in, and the goal of the ultimate realization of *Vajrayāna*. This is, in fact, where we come



round: it is the result of the practice on sound discussed by *Mañjuśrī*, which according to *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* was also the means by which *Avalokiteśvara* attained liberation.

The Sanskrit word *nāḍ* has a multitude of meanings of which the most common are *howl*, *cry*, *roar*, *thunder*, and *to sound*. This points directly at the nature of mind as described in the highest level *Yoga Tantra*. The addition of an “a” at the end augments its array of meaning into *tone*, *sound*, *river*, or *stream*. The wavy shape of the visual *nāḍa* alludes to that fact; however, according to *Nāḍa Yoga*, the stream that *nāḍa* refers to is the essence of the mindstream itself, expressed as the internal sound stream, the object of meditation practiced by *Mañjuśrī* and *Avalokiteśvara*. The two meanings of *stream* and *to sound* describe the means of the sacred sound training, precisely the *nāḍa* yoga meditation on the internal *sound stream*. The method itself is described in the *nāḍa* yoga praxis as consisting of ten levels of increasingly subtler realization characterized by a unique sound for each, an uncanny resemblance of the system of ten bodhisattva *bhumis*. It further describes the four types of sound used in the *Yang* praxis, respectively the outer, inner, visual, and silent-unstruck-unborn sound of *nāḍa*, otherwise described as the union of *mantra* and *praṇa* in Padma Lingpa’s *Exceedingly Concise Sadhana of Peaceful Guru Padmasambhava* (Bieler 12).

A successful language is, more often than not, the result of a pre-existent oral tradition which at some point in time developed a system of writing due to a perceived need for transcending time and space, as well as for accurate transmission and communication of data. The praxis of sacred sound is no exception. In the case of *Yang*, a thorough investigation of scholarly rigor and magnitude may reconnect the tantric ceremonial praxis of sacred sound back to its original root and intent, and find its scriptural roots and practicum in the treatises of *Nāḍa Yoga*. Furthermore it would reestablish its role of paramount importance in the context of *sādhana* praxis. But even more important, it would re-establish its validity as a most expedient means for self-emancipation in this time and age.

Rangjung Yeshe Institute is a place of marvelous efforts. It may also become the nexus of a sacred sound renaissance, as preserved in the *Vajrayāna* tradition. The auspicious interconnectedness of such course of events is staggering: it is the remembrance of and heedfulness to *Mañjuśrī*’s advice (*nāḍa*) in the heart (*nāḍa*) of Kathmandu Valley, which legend has it he cut open with his wisdom (*nāḍa*) sword; it is located at the Great Stupa of Boudhanath, which the old lore says was built by the Great Guru of Orgyen (who brought the teachings on *nāḍa* to Tibet) and his virtuous brothers in a former life (did you notice the *nāḍa* on top of the Great Stupa?); and it is a virtuous aspiration inspired by the One who is All-Good, The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel *Samantabhadra* (*nāḍa*), at the place where it is said that all wishes come true... And the next time one holds a vajra and a bell, or hears its sound, it may be of use to realize it as the sound of emptiness, precisely the dynamic tendency of the *Vajra Ground*, expressed as the primordial *maṇḍala*, of which there is a masterful exposition in the *Aspiration Prayer of Samantabhadra* (*Kuntuzangpo*’s *Monlam*). Sarva Mangalam.



## GLIMPSES OF MANJUSRI BY SUVARAJ LAMA





## WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND BY JORDI ROIG

