

Acoustic Awakening
Sound and Sonic Imagination in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra

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Abstract

This dissertation brings attention to the sensory and sonic worlds of Tibetan Buddhism in the 11th and 12th centuries. The senses are fundamental tools for how Buddhists have historically made and been affected by religion. We find a wealth of such sensory engagement in Nyingma tantric literature of the foundational Tibetan Renaissance period. This study focuses on two textual traditions that are at the core of both the Mahāyoga and Great Perfection lineages, divergent schools of philosophy and practice within the larger Nyingma tradition: *The Secret Matrix Tantra* (*guhyagarbaha*, *gsang ba'i snying po*) and one of its Mahāyoga commentaries, *The Sun's Quintessence*; and *The Unimpeded Sound Tantra* (*sgra thal 'gyur*), considered the root text of the *Seventeen Tantras* of the Great Perfection tradition, along with its main commentary, *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*.

I argue that sound is a central component for both traditions at this time, though the ways they use it differ significantly, echoing core and under considered divergences between Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection. Sound is a canvas on which to imagine Buddhist visions of both our mundane world and the possibilities of transcendence. This sonic focus further informs their core contemplative practices, the soundscapes of which become infused with their imaginations of the mundane world and transcendence. The *Secret Matrix's* imaginations and contemplative practice of *Deity Yoga* encodes the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet with a range of Buddhist meanings and arrays them across a divine maṇḍala, transforming sounds into Buddhist deities, enacting Buddhist activities, and turning the practitioner into a Buddha. The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra organizes its imaginative and contemplative projects around the practice of *Listening to the Elements*,

in which a Buddhist meditator goes out into the wilderness to listen to the rush of a raging river, the clinking of stones, the roar of a bonfire, or the whistle of the wind on a mountain peak – elemental sounds that give way to transcendent soundscapes and sonic transmissions.

In this dissertation, I present accounts of these previously untranslated texts according to their own systems of organization and logic. I also interrogate the deeper meanings and processes of these complex, esoteric texts through engaging with contemporary discourses. I argue that both traditions make ontological, epistemological, cosmological, and soteriological claims in their efforts to establish sonic imaginations of the mundane world and transcendence, and in their mobilizations of those imaginations in sonic and aural contemplative practices. Finally, I turn to the theoretical tool of affective atmospheres to draw together the many pieces of imagination and contemplation, and to better comprehend the broader sensory and affective processes at play for these traditions. In the end, I find that sound is a key sensory metaphor and pathway for these traditions' production of Buddhist forms of religious meaning and affective transformations, all leading to acoustic awakening.

*Dedicated to my parents,
whose love and support have resounded throughout my life.*

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Introduction

0.1 Central Questions

Sound affects people. We have all had the experience of being moved in some way by sound, whether from music that brightens our mood or deepens our sadness, speeches with intonations that motivate us or stir our rage, noises of festivities that excite or overwhelm us, or the sounds of our natural environments that can signal danger or calm us. But why does sound seem to have such and profound emotional affect on us? How do sensory stimuli meet our emotional selves and transform them? And does sound have unique potential to accomplish this?

Religion is a domain that seeks to move people. While its sensory methodologies have long been overlooked in modern scholarship, emerging research and practical experience reveal the ways that religions are often deeply connected to sensory expression, immersing their followers in rich sensory worlds. This has a range of implications from prescribing foods to eat or offer based on the perceived tastes of the gods, to being able to bring divine beings into our world through careful depiction. Fields of religious studies and sensory studies share a deep curiosity as to the process by which our external worlds and our senses might transform our experience of the world and affect us in religious ways. Some seem to reject entirely previous models of religious studies scholarship based in studies of language and literature, which find religions demarcating the sacred and profane through doctrine while people merely follow these rules. The opposing view to this linguistic paradigm privileges human experience and the ways it affects embodied changes within us, which are only then recorded in religious

texts.

In this dissertation, I will contribute to this exploration by bringing attention to the sensory and sonic world of Tibetan Buddhism in the 11th and 12th centuries. The senses are a fundamental component for Tibetan Buddhism. It has a rich history of sensory materials in rituals, with sacred paintings, music, pungent incense, and edible offerings. They are used in contemplative practices that often include multi-sensory visualizations of sacred environments and deities, physical yogas, and prescriptions for the right kinds of foods to sustain the body. These are more than just props – they are fundamental tools for how Buddhists have historically made, and been affected by, religion. However, within Buddhist studies and religious studies in general, these sensory dimensions are often overlooked or relegated to supportive roles and lush backgrounds rather than focused on as primary makers of Tibetan religiosity. Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection traditions of the Tibetan Buddhism, and specifically of the Nyingma or Ancient tradition (*nying ma*), are prime examples of this. For both traditions, much scholarly emphasis has been placed on their unique philosophies, worldviews, poetics, and cognitive practices (and justifiably so), yet often not attuning to their incredibly diverse and deeply sensory locales, imaginations, divinities, and contemplations.

We find a wealth of such sensory engagement in Nyingma tantric literature of the foundational Tibetan Renaissance time period of the 11th-12th centuries. In this dissertation, I will focus on two textual traditions that are at the core of both the Mahāyoga and Great Perfection lineages within the larger Nyingma tradition. In Mahāyoga, I focus on *The Secret Matrix Tantra* (*gsang ba'i snying po*) and one of its commentaries from the *Zur* lineage. In the Great Perfection, I turn to a foundational text

of the *Heart Quintessence* tradition, *The Unimpeded Sound Tantra* (*sgra thal 'gyur*) and its main commentary. However, while these are both included in Nyingma tantric literature, they are considered quite different, with Mahāyoga's emphasis on effortful practice, aesthetics of violence and sexuality, and complex ritual quest for the transformation of bliss and rage, and the Great Perfection's aesthetics of naturalness, ease, and spontaneity, critique of intellectual and ritual complexity, and contemplative orientation towards release and emergent visions.

Specifically, we find that sound is featured as a central component for both traditions at this time. These two texts use sound as a canvas on which to imagine Buddhist visions of both our mundane world and the possibilities of transcendence. In addition, we find their core contemplative practices revolve around the sounds onto which these rich imaginations were overlaid. For the *Secret Matrix* tantra, the practice of *Deity Yoga* most prominently features this sonic basis. The letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are encoded with a range of Buddhist meanings and are then arrayed across a divine maṇḍala, transforming into Buddhist deities and enacting Buddhist activities. This pattern follows historical tantric traditions of sound and will serve as a prime example of normative tantric discourses around sound.¹ The Great Perfection, instead, innovates with sound. *Listening to the Elements* is the central and novel contemplation for the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, in which a Buddhist meditator goes out into the wilderness to focus on an array of natural sounds. Aligning the elemental typology of one's body with

¹ For detailed accounts of such tantric traditions in India, see André Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, trans. Jacques Gontier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); and Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

the outer natural elements of water, earth, fire, and wind, a practitioner will listen to the rush of a raging river, the clinking of stones, the roar of a bonfire, or the whistle of the wind on a mountain peak.

These are emblematic practices and imaginations that herald the senses, and specifically hearing, as an important pathway for religious experience. They both open our understandings of the rich sensory world of Tibetan Buddhist tantra and problematize academic conceptions of Buddhist sensory models which tend to see vision as primary. However, how do such sonic contemplations and imaginations work together to affect people and produce religious experiences?

0.1.1 Affective Atmospheres

To help answer this question, I would like to turn to the idea of atmospheres. In a meteorological sense, atmospheres are nebulous areas that surround and enclose us, affecting our experience of a place. But atmospheres are not only about the weather or exterior worlds. Atmospheres can be calming, invigorating, or tense, and can be felt with groups of people who shout out in protest or cast suspicion in hushed tones, and inside constructed buildings designed to pacify individuality or awaken the senses. These atmospheres are emotionally transformative and rely on our own perception and imagination just as much as on the sensory world around us. A storm may be a frightening experience for a child who thinks the world is ending, but those same sounds of rain and thunder can make one feel cozy with a book, or romantic with a partner.

It is in this coming together of sensory worlds and sensory imaginations that I will explore the sonic contemplations and literature of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. This investigation will seek to uncover ways that Tibetan Buddhism, in its

Renaissance period of the 11th-12th centuries, made sense of its sonic environments in ways that are grounded deeply in Buddhist terms, and mobilized those understandings in transformative contemplative practices. The atmospheres they create through such careful delineation of sonic imagination and contemplative prescription affect their practitioner audience in ways that are aligned with Buddhist goals, delivering experiences of awakening through acoustic means.

I will attempt to make sense of these sensory processes by drawing upon the idea of affective atmospheres, a theoretical tool posed by Ben Anderson,² that sees affect emerging through the combination of sensory spaces and people who perceive them through their individual imaginations. This tool gives us a framework to help organize and reflect on our texts which seem to produce their affective programs through such combinations of imagination and sensory experience in the form of contemplative practice.

However, while Anderson's theory attempts to make descriptive claims on the process of affect, we will find that these two tantras are attempting to construct and prescribe both the sonic imaginations and contemplations required to produce these affective atmospheres. These texts seem to address an implicit question for Tibetan Buddhism: if sensory atmospheres can change our emotions, sense of identity, and connection to larger worlds, how might religion create atmospheres that ignites a spiritual transformation that removes emotional afflictions and replaces them with bliss, disintegrates our sense of self complicit in our suffering, and breaks down barriers between external environments and ourselves to effect the dissolution of dualistic subject

² Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009): 77-81.

object grasping necessary for awakening?

In this dissertation, I will thus focus on the ways these texts are producing affective atmospheres through the creation of sonic imaginations and the mobilization of those imaginations in sonic contemplations that locate practitioners within the soundscapes previously encoded with Buddhist ideologies of our mundane worlds and transcendence and from it. These two ideas, sonic imagination and sonic contemplation will be attended to separately throughout this dissertation. Parts One and Two will uncover the sonic imaginations of our mundane worlds and of transcendence for both texts. Part Three will then demonstrate how these traditions bring those imaginations to life in contemplative practices that use sounds to chart embodied transformations from the mundane to the transcendent. Overall, I will explore the ways that these texts produce both imagination and contemplation, and ultimately discover the ways these two components of tantric literature can create affective atmospheres leading to the experiential embodiment of religious values and goals.

In the sections below, I will outline the ideas of sonic imagination and sonic contemplation which will be central to the larger exploration of acoustic affective atmosphere. In these descriptions, I will reflect on ways that these ideas have been taken up in scholarship to help inform how I will approach these two textual traditions. While such scholarship surrounding affective atmospheres, sonic imaginations, and contemplative practices is useful for piecing together the sensory worlds of twelfth-century Tibetan Buddhist tantra, my focus in this dissertation will remain on the texts themselves. These theories are simply imperfect tools to help us excavate the contemplative programs and presentations of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound*

tantras.

0.1.1.1 Sonic Imaginations

Throughout these texts, Buddhist sensibilities and ideologies of ourselves and our environments in their mundane delusions and transcendent realities are mapped onto soundscapes and reimagined according to their sonic properties. Sound is a primary medium of inquiry for these traditions, taken up in contemplative practice. We find these texts encoding the sounds used for such contemplation with Buddhist ideology to model a system of interpretation for affective states arising from their relevant contemplative practices of listening and recitation. These imaginations chart the hermeneutic horizons for practitioners in which the possibilities of acoustic awakening promised by these texts might become a reality.

In this way, they are creating a “sonic imagination” for Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practice and thought. In the introduction to *The Sound Studies Reader*, Johnathan Sterne describes sonic imagination as

*a deliberately synesthetic neologism—it is about sound but occupies an ambiguous position between sound culture and a space of contemplation outside it. Sonic imaginations are necessarily plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe. They are fascinated by sound but driven to fashion some new intellectual facility to make sense of some part of the sonic world.*³

Sonic imaginations thus use sounds as a platform on which one can reconsider other themes. In these two tantras, we will find a broad range of traditional Buddhist ideologies that are re-envisioned according to the ways they interact with and are reflected by sound.

³ Johnathan Sterne, *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Organizations and functions of sound will be employed as approaches for fresh understandings of these systems of knowledge. They further offer a filter of understanding through which future interactions with their soundscapes and concordant ideologies can repeatedly be interpreted in ways that align with this system.

These imaginations function as a substrate to the divergent traditions of Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection within their shared cultural milieu of Nyingma Tantra. This pattern aligns with the role of sound in South Asian religious traditions theorized by Guy Beck.⁴ In Hindu Vedic and Tantric traditions, Beck found that sacred sound was acting as a “mysterium magnum” that was a sprawling foundation of religious interpretation connecting various traditions.

Sonic imaginations in these texts use sound to connect, but they also encode sound with a diverse array of Buddhist knowledge. The imaginations thus encoded in sound can then be sensorily embodied by members of that cultural system. Stephen Feld noted this feature of sonic imagination within his trailblazing ethnography the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. There, the sound of bird calls was imagined as the voices of the community’s ancestors and served as a sensory platform on which experiences of grief, remembrance, and connection could be felt.⁵ Likewise, Byron Dueck theorized that sound’s capacity of “mutable iconicity” enabled it to contain a depth of cultural knowledge and sentiment. He founded that sound could be cast in iconic ways according to the practices, stories, and emotions surrounding their production and perception, such

⁴ Beck, *Sonic Theology*.

⁵ Stephen Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression, 3rd Edition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

as in North American indigenous practices of drum song.⁶

Steven Collins' concept of the imaginaire⁷ further points to a shared imagination, often produced in literature, through which a culture can understand their world. He found that the Pali Buddhist canon produced such an imagination through centuries of carefully curated and stable narrative and ideological production.⁸ These machinations were generated in literature, but he theorized the ways they informed the experiences of its audience, changing their perceptions of the world.

We can also conceptualize this process of imagination as one that moves between practices and reflective writing on them, similar to Victor Turner's view on ritual commentary as an extra-textual ritual process.⁹ These imaginations can work as scripts of social dramas that move fluidly between the performing of them and the ideation around them, both informing the other. These texts exist within worlds of contemplative practice, both for the Great Perfection and Mahāyoga traditions. The existence of commentaries on these tantras before and after the ones witnessed here indicate that other Tibetan Buddhist thinkers and practitioners were engaging with these ideas and performing these sonic practices. The imaginations formed in these commentaries can be thought of as part of that reciprocal process between practices and texts. This dynamic aspect of imagination can help us to consider the role of religious discourse in the

⁶ Dueck, Byron. "North American Indigenous Song, the Sacred and the Senses." In *Sensual Religion: Religion and the Five Senses*. Eds. Graham Harvey and Jessica Hughes. (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2018): 170-190.

⁷ Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸ His theory works on the long durée for a given culture. The scope of the texts in this dissertation more reflects a cultural moment, though one which of course exists within longer cultural histories and textual traditions. Nevertheless, the kinds of work and affect of Collins' imaginaire can be witnessed in the careful curation performed by these textual traditions.

⁹ Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 141-168.

contemplative engagement and experiences of these texts.

Lastly, work on visionary literature and practice in Tibetan Buddhism, such as by Matthew Kapstein¹⁰ and Christopher Hatchell¹¹ shows us how the senses can function as both repository and canvas for cultural knowledge production and the encoding of Buddhist ideologies onto sensory mediums. These authors focus on Great Perfection and Mahāyoga literature, highlighting the relationships and disparities between the two through sensory explorations and analyses. They find that light and visionary experiences came to represent and support ontologies of the divine and the apotheosis of the adept. Light was thus theorized according to Buddhist philosophy, cosmology, and physiology, and was central to Tibetan contemplative practices in both traditions. It is in the wake of such sensory models that privilege vision, found in both modern academic and many traditional accounts of Tibetan Buddhism, that we will turn to the foundational ways that sound also functions as a sensory platform for both imagination and contemplation in the Tibetan Renaissance.

0.1.1.2 Contemplative Practice

Sonic contemplative practices in the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound Tantras* are designed to take up these sonic imaginations – these soundscapes encoded with Buddhist ideologies of the mundane world and transcendence. Through embodied sensory practice, these ideologies can then be made real, truly brought into one’s experience.¹² These sonic

¹⁰ Matthew Kapstein ed., *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹¹ Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹² Fulfilling the common Tibetan term for what in English is often translated as meditation or practice – “bringing into one’s experience.”

contemplations mobilize and manipulate their relevant soundscapes in order to manifest intended experiences. We will find that encoded sounds of the elements and alphabets are foregrounded in settings matching traditional aesthetic templates of nature, royalty, and sexuality. Practitioners are placed within these soundscapes and spaces to optimize sonic immersion, while the sounds move and transform around them, either as natural processes or as recitations and auralizations. To accomplish this, these textual traditions play with three necessary aspects of sonic contemplation: sounds, spaces, and people.

0.1.1.2.1 Sounds

Sounds are the sensory objects of meditation for these aural practices and compose the soundscape of a given environment. The soundscape is considered to be “the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape,”¹³ “the totality of all sounds within a location with an emphasis in the relationship between individual’s or society’s perception of, understanding of and interaction with the sonic environment,”¹⁴ and as Schafer introduces it, “a field of interactions, even when particularized into its component sound events” in which “sounds affect and change one another (and us).”¹⁵ In one sense, it is the sonic equivalent of a landscape, everything that can be heard in a given environment. But unlike the visual features of a landscape, the soundscape is inherently moving – sounds change in their dynamics, rhythms, pitches, and sources constantly. Visual form can remain static; however, sounds are by their nature temporal and ephemeral. In addition,

¹³ Almo Farina, *Soundscape Ecology: Principles, Patterns, Methods and Applications* (New York: Springer, 2014).

¹⁴ Payne SR, Davies WJ, Adams MD, “Research into the practical policy applications of soundscapes concepts and techniques in urban areas,” *DEFRA report NANR200*, June (2009).

¹⁵ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994): 131.

unlike visual landscapes, for which we have rich descriptive vocabulary and ability to represent, such as in drawings or photography, the soundscape remains more elusive. Even an audio recording of a soundscape would only represent a specific instance of it, and never its totality. And even so, while a pictured landscape can be taken in immediately, a soundscape needs to be experienced in its own time.

0.1.1.2.2 Spaces

The soundscape is also deeply connected to the space or landscape in which it resonates. Sounds arise from spatial features, are transformed by the contours and reverberance of a space's surfaces and are positioned around the listener throughout the space according to divergent organizational models. This affects the ways sounds are produced and heard. In this way, "the landscape dimension is indispensable to fully understand the patterns and processes that concern a soundscape,"¹⁶ and "in an embodied system... perception and senses are indivisible from the wider environment."¹⁷

When discussing environmental sound art, a modern musical genre that uses such soundscapes as their medium, environmental sound is described as a "conception of sound in which it is defined by its environmental context."¹⁸ These works have a "strong connection to specific spaces, settings, and geographic locations" that are "often integral to the realization of environmental sound art."¹⁹ In this way, the design of these spaces can be considered in terms of musical composition, as in environmental sound art or

¹⁶ Farina, *Soundscape Ecology*, 7.

¹⁷ Mark Grimshaw and Tom Garner, *Sonic Virtuality: Sound as Emergent Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 3.

¹⁸ Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo eds. *Environmental Sound Artists: In Their Own Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): xix.

¹⁹ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xi.

sound installation art, which “seeks to unfurl an event for the senses” that “readily embraces a greater field of matter, aligning object, subject, and environment within an expanded production.”²⁰

The design of spaces in the production of desired soundscapes is also considered in acoustic design and aural architecture. Typically, these fields design for urban spaces and seek to diminish noise pollution while creating supportive and aesthetically pleasing soundscapes for residents and workers. However, their insights can be useful in understanding the design of acoustic contemplative spaces. Aural architecture takes up architectural ideas “concerned with the design, arrangement, and manipulation of the physical properties of space”²¹ and focuses on those “properties of a space that can be experienced by listening.”²² This encompasses a “composite of numerous surfaces, objects, and geometries in a complicated environment,”²³ specially selected by an aural architect “based on what is desirable in a particular cultural framework... [to] create a space that induces such feelings as exhilaration, contemplative tranquility, heightened arousal, or a harmonious and mystical connection to the cosmos.”²⁴ As we will find in our texts, spaces thus a central component to the production of affect based on their unique religious imaginations described in the tantras.

Most often, spaces designed in aural architecture will be physical, both natural and built, “exploiting the sonorous potential of natural or manmade objects or structures, or

²⁰ Brandon LaBelle, “Sharing Architecture: Space, Time, and the Aesthetics of Pressure,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 184.

²¹ Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007): 1.

²² Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 5.

²³ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 2.

²⁴ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 5.

exploring the acoustic properties of spaces, using sound to activate the resonances of a given environment.”²⁵ In nature, “natural agents such as winds, volcanoes, sea waves, running water, rain, thunderstorms, lightning, avalanches, earthquakes, and floods... represent the sonic background with which other sounds can overlap, mix, or mask.”²⁶ In built environments, “architects embed their respective artistic messages in structures that we see, hear, and feel.”²⁷

However, these can also be virtual spaces. “Aural architecture includes the creation of spatial experiences where a physical space does not actually exist, so-called virtual, phantom, and illusory spaces.”²⁸ In environmental sound art, composers can “create works that function as autonomous sonic environments in themselves,”²⁹ not needing outside natural conditions to produce their spaces. And in Grimshaw’s project on Sonic Virtuality posits sound as “an emergent perception... a creative act within our mind, as something that is dependent wholly or in part on cognition and emotion and this perception does not necessarily require sensation.”³⁰ Thus, “distinctions previously made between real sound and virtual sound are invalid. ... Imagined sound is sound.”³¹ We will find these virtual spaces especially useful to consider when thinking through imaginative contemplative practices of both visualization and auralization, “mentally modeling sound by remembering or by creating sound.”³²

²⁵ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xxiv.

²⁶ Farina, *Soundscape Ecology*, 8.

²⁷ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 1.

²⁸ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 6.

²⁹ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xxiv.

³⁰ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 2.

³¹ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 4.

³² Pauline Oliveros, “Auralizing in the Sonosphere,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 163.

0.1.1.2.3 People

These soundscapes and their concordant spaces, however, require a human component to listen to them. Sound “must also be received by a sentient being who is able to cognitively translate those vibrations into psychological experiences; thus, the actualization of sound as an experiential phenomenon also necessitates the existence of the *listener*.”³³ Further, this act of listening is more than just sonic detection, which is instead equivalent to passive hearing, but is an “active attention or reaction to the meaning, emotions, and symbolism contained within sound.”³⁴ Even in the Great Perfection’s prioritization of ease and passivity in its contemplative model, we will thus find that these sonic contemplations prescribe active modes of listening that incorporate sonic imaginations as a part of practitioners’ orientation.

This active process of listening can be considered with three levels of attention to sonic ambience: “Listening research, which is an active conscious activity for the listener, tuned in to a specific sound... Listening in readiness when the listener’s attention is directed elsewhere but is ready to receive meaningful information... [and] Background listening or distracted listening, when the listener is engaged in other activities and does not pay attention to a specific sound.”³⁵ For contemplative listening practices, the aim may often be to focus on a particular sound with ‘listening research’, but other modes of listening, and proscriptions of what to avoid may engage these other modes of listening. Humans perform all these modes constantly in different contexts and often without

³³ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, 2016, xix.

³⁴ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 5.

³⁵ Barry Truax. *Acoustic Communication* (Nordwood: Ablex Publishing, 1994).

thinking. However, they also can be trained in, such as with Schafer's push for ear cleaning, practices geared towards attuning people to more precisely perceiving the soundscape.³⁶

These modes of listening happen in sonic environments, in which listeners are placed. As Grimshaw elucidates, "we are able to cognitively offload... the location of sound onto the environment and we make use of this to locate our selves in space."³⁷ Connecting our embodied selves to these sonic environments, we can further think of the relationship in terms of three levels of complexity: "The first level is dominated by the physical properties of the sounds... the second level is the level of the physiological perception of every single species... [and] a third level pertains to the interpretation of the sounds according to genetic or cultural/social decodification of the sonic signals."³⁸ These levels connect up sounds to bodies and modes of interpretation, drawing a distinct line between the soundscape and the listener's embodied and ideological relationship to them.

Taking upon this interpretive level, we find that the background of the listeners is also central to the way they will listen and what they will gain from it. "The perception of the soundscape is inherently personal and affected by what a listener, each with a unique set of experiences and preferences, brings to the listening situation. This framework is therefore underpinned by the proposition that a person's perception of a soundscape depends most strongly on the activity they are doing at the time, and consequently their corresponding state of listening."³⁹ In addition, people's experiences, preferences, and

³⁶ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 208.

³⁷ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 4.

³⁸ Farina, *Soundscape Ecology*, 108.

³⁹ Paul Jennings and Rebecca Cain, "A Framework for Improving Urban Soundscapes," *Applied Acoustics* 74, no. 2 (2013): 293-299.

backgrounds form them into communities of auditory subcultures. These subcultures are relatively homogeneous in the way they relate to aspects of soundscapes. These are composed of “active users of particular kinds of acoustic space who share goals, motivation, genetic ability, and opportunities... They teach themselves to attend to the particular spatial attributes they consider important.”⁴⁰ Again, the perception of people marks the connection between sonic imaginations and aural experiences developed through sonic contemplation. Attending to this dimension of sonic contemplation will help us understand its relationship to sonic imagination and the ways that their combinations can be productive of atmospheres that will affect the very practitioners held in between.

0.1.2 Four Contemporary Discourses

Throughout the three parts of this dissertation that will focus on sonic imaginations of the mundane worlds and transcendence, as well as their mobilizations in sonic contemplations, we will also attend to four broader discourses these traditions are addressing through sound. I argue that these texts are using imagination and contemplation to make four kinds of religious claims that use sound as their basis or instrument: ontological, epistemological, cosmological, and soteriological. These issues have historically been foundational to the Buddhist project of understanding the world and becoming free from the suffering inherent to it. Exploring the ways both the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* prioritize and employ these discourses will help us reconstruct Tibetan concerns in ways that enable greater contemporary understanding of

⁴⁰ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 7.

these traditions. In combination with the overarching theoretical support of affective atmospheres, to which these four discourses will contribute, such contemporary theoretical resources will provide avenues of insight into sensory and religious projects of Tibetan Buddhism at this time. They will also allow for the understandings of these traditions gained from this study to enter into broader scholarly conversations around the religious sensory production of affect.

0.1.2.1 Ontological

What happens when you consider the Buddhist world through sound? As Marshall McLuhan says, “the medium is the message.”⁴¹ This raises a question for us: how does this aural sensory orientation and the structures tied to it impact the ways these traditions are conceiving of their imaginative and contemplative programs? In other words, how does using sound as an ontological touchstone affect tantric Buddhism’s philosophical presentations and reflections? Tibetan Buddhism is famous for other ontological touchstones such as cognition and vision, around which to organize their views of the world. Logical reasoning and detailed descriptions of the mind have historically been central components for the making and learning of Buddhist philosophy. Visual touchstones can also be readily found in the larger tantric traditions to which these texts belong, specifically with philosophies and contemplations finding visual centers of gravity in visualization practices and visionary experiences.

In Mahāyoga tantras, visualization is generally considered the key component of the deity yoga practice, in which one arises in the virtual and visual form of an awakened

⁴¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).

being. Practitioners further visually imagine a divine space filled with colorful lights, ornaments, architecture, and beings. These images are typically seen as representative of aspects of Buddhist ideology, often recounted in sections called “recollecting purity.” They are thus used as visual metaphors and structures around which to organize and present Buddhist worldviews. Likewise, in the Great Perfection, the visionary experiences of the Direct Crossing (*thod rgal*) are widely considered the highest form of practice, in which visual forms of Buddhist deities and other phenomena are said to naturally and spontaneously arise. These visionary experiences are a major part of the *Seventeen Tantras*, a collection of 11th-12th century texts to which the *Unimpeded Sound* is considered foundational. These experiences are also privileged by later generations, especially by Longchenpa, the 14th century systematizer of the *Seventeen Tantras*, as the defining modality of contemplative inquiry and realization in the Great Perfection. Visionary experiences are used in this tradition to consider Buddhist philosophical concepts such as emptiness, tantric physiology, and natural spontaneity.⁴²

However, there are many more ontological touchstones and sensory orientations traditionally used by Tibetan Buddhists. The body is considered according to various modes such as hydraulic, photic, thermal-dynamic, and linguistic models. Smell, taste, and touch are all taken up in ritual practice and their metaphors are used variously, such as the “one taste” (*ro cig*) of experiencing reality. These background orientations change the way contemplative and philosophical investigations and understandings play out.

Throughout this dissertation, we will thus examine the ways sound operates as a core

⁴² For further consideration of visionary experiences in the Great Perfection, see Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*.

ontological touchstone and how it gives these traditions purchase to reconsider key Buddhist ideologies and experiences. We will interrogate the *Secret Matrix*'s use of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, a sonic structure long used within tantric philosophy and practice. This text uses the alphabet as the framework for its mundane and transcendent imaginations, encoding each letter with a set of correspondences and linking those sets across cosmological lines. The *Unimpeded Sound*, instead, considers sound in a more holistic way, presenting an account of linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, material, and doctrinal sound that serves as a framework for imagining the mundane world and transcendence of it. In both of these cases, we will explore the implications, limits, and affordances of the texts' choices to use sound as an ontological touchstone for their imaginative projects.

0.1.2.2 Epistemological

What does sound express? Does it communicate new truths, or does it deceive us?

Expressing truths and falsehoods are primary capacities of sound. This often involves language, which offers great specificity (and fallacy) in reference. Buddhism has grappled with language as both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, language is the medium of the Buddha's speech, a way to express the path to awakening, to reveal reality. On the other hand, language hides the truth behind nominal fictions, granting undeserved solidity and reality to the empty concepts and phenomena of our world.

Language is not the only way that sound functions epistemologically though. A bird's song delivers a sense of aesthetic wonder, while the roar of thunder can threaten downpour. Sounds can thus transmit a broad array of ideas, affects, and sensations. Some can reveal truths of the world beyond our sight, while again, others can deceive. That

same thunder could be a mere summer storm, and that birdsong might just be a beautiful distraction.

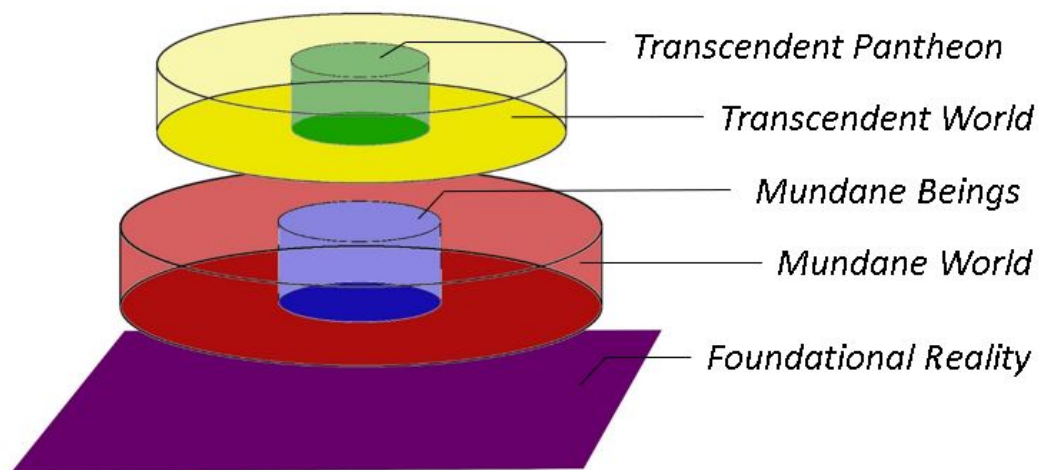
It is along these dual lines that the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras consider the epistemological functions of sound. We will hear the ways sound, in particular language, instills confusion and faulty meanings, concealing reality. In this way, these texts propose that sound is epistemologically complicit in the creation of the mundane world and our suffering. However, sounds might also reveal reality. Just as sounds are imagined as causes of straying, so too are they imagined as tools for awakening. We will find that new transcendent meanings will replace old mundane references and that the vibrational qualities of the sounds themselves will have the capacity to disrupt confused dualistic grasping and transmit awakened truths. These transformations of sound's epistemological capacities will finally be taken up in sonic contemplations which function based on these understandings, moving practitioners from confused ways of perceiving the world, to awakened forms of knowing. Throughout this dissertation, we will thus explore the ways these texts handle and play with the tension between the limits and power of sonic epistemology, both in the form of language and our material environments.

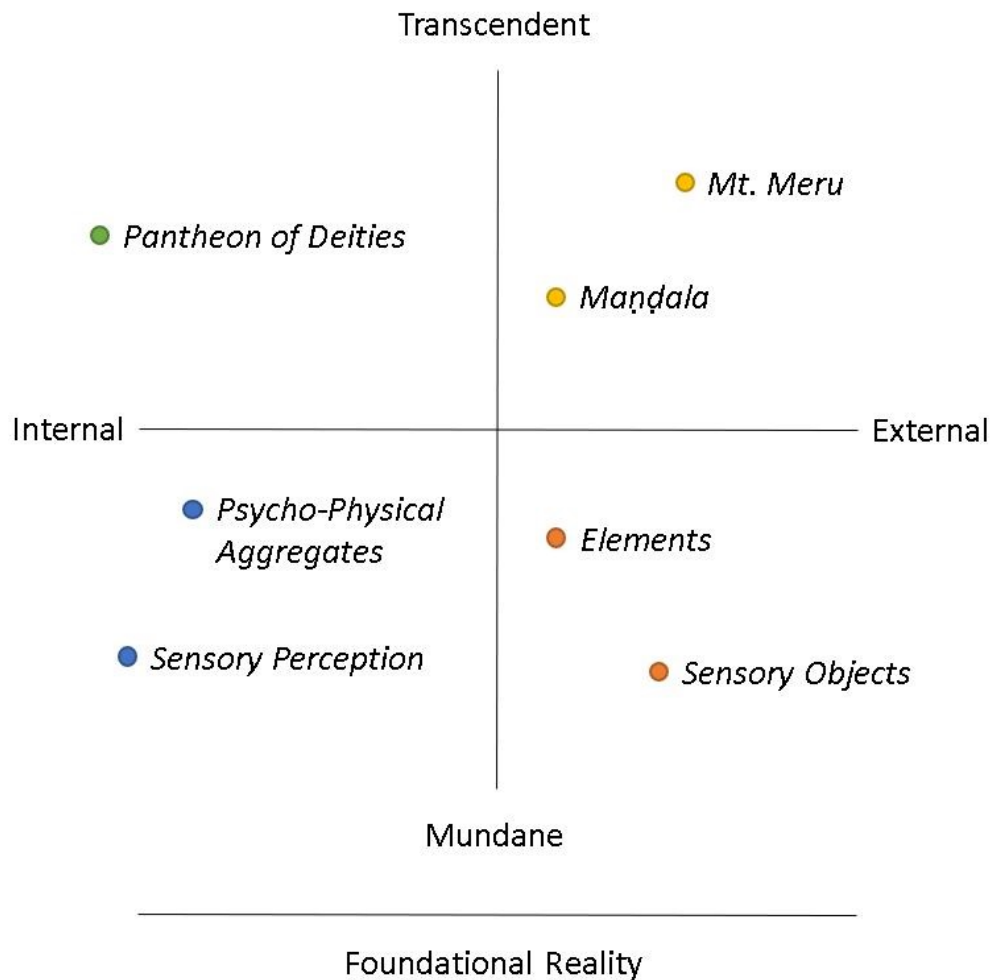
0.1.2.3 Cosmological

Tibetan Buddhism is deeply interested in the creation and order of the cosmos: the manifestation of mundane and transcendent worlds from foundational reality and the ways they are structured and interconnected. There is an implicit tension between an empty reality and the phenomenal worlds of both mundane existence and transcendence that arise from it. How might sound be used to as a positive model of creativity that

allows emptiness to dynamically generate phenomena? We will find that the texts approach this question with Sanskrit linguistic theories of the letter *A* and novel ideas about the ‘sound of reality’ resonating with the elements of our natural environments.

Further, we will attend to the ways these texts use sound to map out cosmological models for such manifestations along two axes – one that charts the distance between the mundane world and transcendence, and another between our exterior environments and ourselves, the beings who live within them. The sonic imaginations of both the mundane worlds and transcendence will place systems of traditional Buddhist knowledge within these four quadrants. However, they will embed links between these nodes, connecting environments to living beings and mundane concepts to transcendent realities. These connections will be activated within their sonic contemplations, dismantling the boundaries between subject and object, producing coemergent atmospheres in which one can transcend their own condition and awaken.





These graphs represent pronounced rubrics for these traditions in their own understandings of foundational reality and the ways we move through its mundane and transcendent manifestations. The vertical axis of the second graph will chart the poles of the mundane world, experienced by those who have strayed, up to the transcendent world, experienced by those who are freed. The horizontal dimension will then be inner and outer spheres of the world, following not only inner experiences and outer material realities, but also the Tibetan model of container and contents (*snod bcod*) – the environment and the beings that inhabit it. In such a model, we find the mundane beings of the six realms of existence arrayed in the mundane material world, while the deities of

the transcendent pantheon manifest in divine abodes, all against the backdrop of foundational reality. These are not static places and embodiments, but rather they offer a map for the dynamic transitions, separations, and connections between levels and positionings that contemplative philosophies and practices in the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras navigate. We will thus focus our cosmological interrogations on the models these texts provide to theorize and experience the dynamic ways the mundane world is constructed, interconnected, and collapsed through sound.

0.1.2.4 Soteriological

Sound is a privileged soteriological pathway for both these texts. The larger traditions of Mahāyoga and Great Perfection, and even the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* themselves, typically prioritize cognition and vision as modes for the kinds of philosophical and contemplative investigation that leads towards freedom from suffering. Against this normative backdrop, we will explore new possibilities that sound offers these traditions in the way they use sensory contemplation to chart the path from suffering to freedom, moves that both are grounded in tantric literature and create innovative soteriological methods.

We will find that the soteriologies of sound presented in these texts are not singular pathways, but rather offer diverse approaches to sonic liberation. We hear sounds from our environments, we speak to each other through language, we represent sounds in the visual forms of letters, we can intone powerful phrases for transformative effects, and we can listen to the rhythms and resonances of our bodies. These various forms of, and orientations to, sound are all encoded with religious meaning in mundane and transcendent imaginations. However, to be soteriologically impactful, they are utilized in

contemplative practices that focus on sounds filling our body, auralized and visualized letters moving through transcendent spaces, verbal communication to transcendent deities, and the spontaneous natural reverberations of our environments as they enfold us in elemental sounds. We will reflect how these diverse pathways of sonic soteriology mark key differences between these two traditions' approaches to freedom. Further, we will consider them through the lens of affective atmospheres, helping us to reconstruct the sensory ways both traditions seek to move their audiences from mundane ignorance to felt senses of awakening.

0.2 The Scholarly Soundscape

This dissertation builds on movements within Buddhist and tantric studies, sense studies, sound studies, and the studies of affect and emotion. These fields express an increased concern for matters of the senses, materiality, embodiment, emotions, and experience. Though authors in each of these disciplines are engaging ideas related to themes found in our two textual traditions, there are few, if any, that take all of them into consideration. Thus, there remain gaps in the current literature at the intersection of these fields that this project seeks to address. In particular, there is a major gap in our understanding of Tibetan Buddhist traditions of the Renaissance period of the 11th and 12th centuries, whose nature and practice are heavily influenced by the confluence of material objects and environments with tantric philosophies and practices of sensory transformations. In this section, I will discuss the ways each of these fields has begun to approach the kinds of atmospheres, imaginations, and contemplations central to this dissertation. However, it is in their largely unexplored juncture that this work fully resonates.

The scholarship surrounding studies of the senses has offered various theoretical lenses to which I can take recourse. While any of these specific methodological frameworks may gain traction on my primary sources, I do not intend to force them upon it in a top-down approach. It is important that I follow the authors of the tantras and their commentaries and attend to their concerns and theoretical outlooks. Indeed, much of the commentarial work attempts to make sense of the root text using Buddhist or tantric theoretical methods. My first priority is to reconstruct and attempt to fully understand these Tibetan theoretical frameworks in their own terms. While I will think with modern scholars about sound, the senses, and their possible roles in such traditions, this remains simply a tool for sparking insight into the worldview of my texts, not something to

superimpose on the texts as defining rubrics.

0.2.1 Buddhist and Tantric Studies

Scholarship on Buddhism and tantra has used a wide range of methods, from Ronald Davidson's focus on historical social organization,⁴³ to Kapstein's literary exegesis,⁴⁴ to Herbert Guenther's philosophical innovations in understanding *The Secret Matrix* tantra.⁴⁵ My work takes inspiration from these authors, drawing from and blending their methods. This research is based in a distinct time, place, and tradition, namely the Nyingma school of 11th-12th century Tibet – a historical reality which informs my reading and analysis. However, I also carefully attend to how these texts make meaning, produce worlds, and interact as I seek to understand their philosophical claims from multiple perspectives. The closest work in tantric studies to this dissertation is Christopher Hatchell's *Naked Seeing*,⁴⁶ which addresses vision and visionary experiences through the comparison of three distinct textual traditions, including the Great Perfection. His comparative interpretation is deeply rooted in the texts and their historical framework, while being creative in his efforts to make sense of the texts' complex and interrelated uses of vision.

Tantric Buddhist studies, however, has yet to adequately explore the multivalent role of sound. Some authors are concerned with ritual incantations, which constitute a

⁴³ Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Herbert V. Guenther, *Matrix of Mystery: Scientific and Humanistic Aspects of rDzogs-chen Thought* (Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications, 1984).

⁴⁶ Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*.

significant sonic aspect of tantra. However, most work has either been about their social-historical role⁴⁷ or language and meaning as opposed to sound itself.⁴⁸ Guy Beck's *Sonic Theology*⁴⁹ and Andre Padoux's *Vāc*⁵⁰ investigate the role of sound in Indian (though not Buddhist and not necessarily tantric) thought through a range of philosophical, practical, and cultural explanations. However, these are a rarity. This dissertation aims to bolster this area of the field with a systematic analysis of the ways sound itself is imagined and used in Tibetan Buddhist textual and experiential worlds.

Musical sound within Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices can also be found within a Buddhist studies, though rarely and usually in ritual and performative contexts. Terry Ellingson's work⁵¹ is a remarkable and sprawling investigation of music within Tibetan Buddhism. However, it follows the trends in the fields of ritual and performance studies that interpret mainly contemporary ritual using mostly anthropological methodology. His work merely nods to its history to strengthen its understanding of the present. Instead, my project seeks to undertake a historical-textual analysis of sound that uses musical ideas as one of its cultural touchstones, though develops its imaginations and contemplations within a far broader understanding of sound.

0.2.2 Sensory Studies

An emerging field of scholarship takes on questions at the core of these interests on

⁴⁷ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Harvey P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

⁵⁰ André Padoux, *Vāc*.

⁵¹ Terry Ellingson, *The Maṇḍala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music*, dissertation (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1979).

materiality, experience, and embodiment – the study of the senses. The senses are the primary, if not only, way that we experience the world. In turn, they become a central modality for the creation and transmission of cultural practices and values. Classen’s essay *Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses*, takes this one step further to assert that “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act.”⁵² Perceptions themselves become imbued by cultural significances, including hierarchies, symbolic values, or sensory metaphors, thus altering the way they are experienced and considered. She calls for scholarly attention towards the specific nature of individual cultures’ own sensory models, uncovering the unique differences and interrelationships between senses.

This is accomplished through attending to practical applications of the senses and to ways different senses relate to social and ideological values. Attuning to sensory models in this way can give insight into how a tradition’s worldview is constructed from their culture’s sensory perceptions and concepts. She also points out obstacles for such study on the senses, such as the assumption that the senses are precultural and transparent ‘windows on the world,’ a biological view that fails to take into consideration into the socially constructed nature of the body and the senses. Classen tackles the view that sight is the only sense of major cultural significance that finds its modern academic iteration based in Western sensory biases. She also attends to the other side of this debate in arguments from scholars such as Marshall McLuhan⁵³ and Walter Ong.⁵⁴ These foundational authors on sensory media and sound oppose a hegemony of vision in

⁵² Constance Classen, “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses.” *UNESCO 153* (1997): 401.

⁵³ Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994).

⁵⁴Walter J. Ong. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

premodern times, with the aural sense predominating in oral cultures. Classen admits that these have paved the way for such an anthropology of the senses, however, these studies do not allow for enough variation between cultures, a central argument of Classen's work.

While many studies of the senses use anthropological methods, there is also increased interest in historical studies of the senses. A foundational series for such work has been the *Cultural History of the Senses* series.⁵⁵ Each volume in this series addresses a different historical time from European history, such as Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, etc. Through contributions by various authors, it seeks to understand historical sensory realities at several different levels: social, urban, market, religious, philosophical and scientific, medical, literary, artistic, and media. This organization provides an excellent introduction to how the senses were considered and used across both temporal and thematic boundaries. While each chapter and volume differ on how and which senses they study, showcasing various ways the senses can be approached, the overall argument from the series is that studies of the sensory modes and models of these cultures and times is necessary for a comprehensive view of history, following Classen's line of the importance of a culture's sensory model to their understanding of and interaction with the world.

These projects address broader questions about cultural models for all the senses, however other works have chosen to look at the role of the senses through a single sense. Such studies have targeted various cultures and time periods, but here I would like to focus on two that are closer to the cultural focus of my work. The first is James

⁵⁵ Constance Classen, gen. ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses*. 6 vol. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

McHugh's book on smell in pre-modern Indian thought, literature, and practice.⁵⁶

Though he has chosen to limit his sensory concern to olfaction, this study is a sweeping look at its role across Indian culture. Focusing on divergent traditions from Buddhist and Jain sensory hierarchies to court and temple uses, to instructional texts describing the materials used to produce these aromatic fragrances and disturbing odors, McHugh shows the ways that smell and fragrant objects affected and were affected by social, economic, political, medical, and religious concerns and realities. While McHugh's approach to smell is far broader than the way I approach sound in Tibetan Buddhism, his writing showcases how historical and textual materials can be adeptly used in the investigation of the ephemeral, a challenge that smell and sound both share.

A second work addressing sensory traditions from a single sense is Matthew Kapstein's edited volume on religious experience of light.⁵⁷ When Kapstein asks himself "why light?" he answers first, why not? He admits that light is only one of many themes to focus on when examining experience and it is as good as any other. Of course, though, he makes a stronger claim for light as perhaps the most prominent shared theme across various religious discourses, our base metaphor for knowledge and virtue, and our primary sense. Even in Buddhism, light dominates discourse of the senses, normally privileged in various hierarchies. Even, and perhaps especially, in Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection traditions studied in this dissertation, light, visualization, and visionary experience have long been held as some of the most important themes and practices (sensory or otherwise). However, his use of light and vision as an access point to

⁵⁶ James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ Kapstein, *The Presence of Light*.

understanding religious experience in general is highly useful. For example, he calls into question claims of ineffable experiences by arguing that all experience, and especially sensory based experiences of light must have some describable content. The category of ineffable experience then may act as a value statement, while the actual experiences rely on sensory understandings of the world, the divine, or reality.

0.2.3 Sound Studies

Sound studies is described as “the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival.”⁵⁸ This field has diverse topics, from contemporary to historical, practical to philosophical, political to scientific to religious. But these are all viewed through sound as a critical lens, whether it is sound production, hearing, listening, technologies, spaces, aesthetics, or communities.

R. Murray Schafer is one of the major progenitors of the field. One of his major works, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*⁵⁹ is a cornerstone of the literature, establishing important concepts, such as the soundscape, in addition to providing a host of terminology for, and ways of thinking about, sound in the world. His primary aim with the book seems practical, to create an instructional book for those interested in recording the soundscape as well as implementing sonic technologies and knowledge of acoustics to create new spaces that resonate with aural sensibilities. As a corollary to such matters of acoustic design, Schafer also coins the term “acoustic ecology,” which instead of trying to mold space for the improvement of its sonic potential, looks at sound in the environment and asks how it affects beings in that

⁵⁸ Jonathan Stern, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Stern (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

⁵⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*.

environment.

In line with Schafer's view on the creation of spaces with acoustic theory in mind, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter's *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Examining Aural Architecture*⁶⁰ examines the role of aurality in the construction of not just buildings, but spaces of many kinds, including virtual or visualized. And while this can be done in a purposeful manner, as Schafer would suggest with acoustic design, Blesser and Salter find that aural architecture is often the product of the influence of various sociocultural forces on spatial design. Even the aural architects do not always recognize they are acting as such, such as shamans performing rituals in caves, or designers of religious ceremonial spaces who want people to feel a connection with the heavenly cosmos. However, the challenge for aural architecture is the lack of a rich symbolic language that visual architecture possesses. They remark that this stems from the nature of aural experiences of space as fleeting and unable to store cultural data, from an inadequate language for describing sound, little appreciation for the emotional importance of hearing due to the predominance of visual modalities, and a lack of recognition for these questions as legitimate lines of inquiry.

Other lines of investigation track the experience of sound. Ihde's *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*⁶¹ focuses on auditory perception and attention to what he terms as 'voice,' a concept that spans beyond human voice to anything that creates sound, external or internal, physical or imagined. He bases his methodology on Husserl and Heidegger, the core phenomenological reductions and bracketing of whom he takes

⁶⁰ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*.

⁶¹ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

as the beginnings of a “prototype for *a science of experience*.”⁶² He is concerned with issues of the center and horizon of aural experience, the sound targeted by listening and silence which is beyond the border of sound. For Ihde, silence is the background of and space in which sound arises, moves, and dissolves, a notion that heightens the experience of listening. In addition to sounds movements and directionality, Ihde also discusses how sound is simultaneously a surrounding force, both of which make up the field-shape of sound. Another of his aims is to find appropriate language for auditory experience, avoiding visual metaphors which misrepresent experience and close off our ability to fully investigate the experiences. He contends that this focus on auditory discourse will also keep us from mistaking aural experiences as private rather than shared, a concept that Kapstein is keen to discuss in his work on religious experience.

Another work that attends to experience is Mark Grimshaw and Tom Garner’s *Sonic Virtuality: Sound as Emergent Perception*.⁶³ Instead of attending to cultural, social, or technological issues often dealt with in sound or sense studies, this work focuses on the perception of sound in more theoretical ways. As a part of this endeavor, they offer a new definition of sound as an “emergent perception,”⁶⁴ which they describe as a mental, creative, and ongoing, without the need for external sonic forces. This leads them into a central concern for virtual imaginative modes of sound, which they posit as ontologically real. While they maintain an interest in physiological and neurological understandings of aural perception, especially through the lens of embodied cognition, they are keen to explore their idea of sonic virtuality that finds perception as an act of creation rather than

⁶² Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 18.

⁶³ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*.

⁶⁴ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 2.

a passive receptivity of external stimuli. This resonates not only with Classen's call for the removal of assumptions surrounding the senses as transparent windows to an external world (though she approaches it from a stance of cultural constructivism), but also with Tibetan Great Perfection ideas about visionary experiences that stem from within the person and are projected outwards.

As sound studies is a new field, very little has been offered on Tibetan and Indian religions, much less tantric Buddhism. This project thus draws upon the current discourse of sound studies, while expanding the field to new topics and theoretical possibilities in Tibetan Buddhism.

0.2.4 Affect and Atmosphere

Affect theory is a broad interest in the ways humans are emotionally affected, spanning a range of disciplines. This dissertation will focus only on the aspects of affect theory that connects with religion, contemplation, and the senses. At the outset of this discussion, it is important to note the larger moves that the affective, material, and sensory turns have taken away from previous trends in the humanities that privileged language and discourse as the primary interpretive model, including in religious studies.

This is distinctly formulated in that Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects*,⁶⁵ which finds previous understandings of religion, such as the discursive interpretive models of J. Z. Smith, to be faulty. This is perhaps most evocatively exemplified through Schaefer's retelling of Smith's story in *Map Is Not Territory*, in which a farmer performs a ritual of

⁶⁵ Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

coating his hands in dirt to prepare to work his land.⁶⁶ Smith reflects that such activity creates a cognitive division between the spheres of home and farm, and the way to understand the farmer's world is to attend to his discursive work in separating the world into two meaningful pieces. Schaefer disagrees, finding this to be an embodied affective practice. He uses affect theory to suggest that such discursive activity did not precede an affective state – “that the farmer didn't start with a cosmology, a need to write the world differently, but with a complex of material sensations emerging out of an affectively driven, embodied practice. What if the practice starts before the concept?”⁶⁷ Thus, Schaefer contends that religious experiences are not produced through ideas, communication, and language, but rather through embodied practices. For Schaefer, if language does shape these experiences, it only does so marginally and erringly.

While his stance represents a refreshing refocus onto embodied experience in understanding the work of religion, I argue that it is the combination of religious discourse and embodied practice that produces religious experience. In the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, we will hear lengthy discourses on sonic imaginations that appear to be necessary for the completion of their contemplative programs. I contend that these literary and contemplative traditions are mutually informative. Reflecting back to Victor Turner's theorization of the relationship between ritual and commentary, we can begin to understand the infinite loop moving between embodied practice and

⁶⁶ “After bathing and eating breakfast, the farmer would step outside, then immediately plunge his arms into the soil, scoop it up, and rub it over his hands. One day, Smith, overwhelmed by curiosity, asked his boss, ‘Why do you do that?’ The farmer studied him, then responded, ‘Don't you city boys understand anything? Inside the house it's dirt; outside, it's earth. You must take it off inside to eat and be with your family. You must put it on outside to work and be with the animals’” (Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 5).

⁶⁷ Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 9.

religious discursive imagination. Perhaps the ideas presented in the sonic imaginations of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras did not precede their embodied practices of recitation and listening. Nonetheless, during a discursive moment in this cycle, these texts are produced and preserved. Religious thinkers in both Mahāyoga and Great Perfection traditions provide linguistic attention and imagination onto felt soundscapes and sonic contemplations. Such discourse is not merely reflection, but prescription for contemplative activity – instructions for how to perform and interpret the embodied experiences of contemplative action. Thus, I will be attending to these texts as those discursive conceptualizations onto sensory spheres, as well as ways these Tibetan authors are considering and supporting religious affective experiences.

With this understanding of the role of affect in this dissertation, the main theoretical tool to frame my reflections on these textual traditions is affective atmospheres. Ben Anderson posed this concept in a 2009 paper of the same name,⁶⁸ basing the principle on work by Gernot Böhme and Mikel Dufrenne in aesthetics and phenomenology, respectively. This theory locates affect in the intersection of sensory environments and the perceptions of people who inhabit them. For Anderson, affective atmospheres are a class of experience that arises alongside a formation of subjectivity when two or more bodies, human or non-human, come together. The atmosphere neither belongs to the object nor to subjects but requires both to interact. Material environments contain particular sensory conditions which are apprehended in ways that are meaningful or evocative for the perceiver. Thus, they are not merely qualities of objects nor subjective states, but rather are created and transformed by their juncture.

⁶⁸ Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 77-81.

These affective intensities⁶⁹ continually emerge in our experience, demonstrating changes in the conditions of these bodies over time.⁷⁰ The affective qualities of atmospheres express new senses of space and time that go beyond the normal perception of environments, operating within the structures of this ‘expressed world.’⁷¹ In this way, a space of affective intensity ‘overflows’ with embodied senses of meaning beyond that perception environments of subjects and objects. This atmosphere envelops the bodies from which it radially emerges. They are semi-autonomous; in that they are things that exist beyond their constituent parts. However, they are innately tied to those parts, and cannot exist on their own. Finally, they contain opposites in productive tensions. They are both present and felt, though absent and intangible. They are deeply material as they come from sensory objects yet are within a realm of ideas as they are perceived and imagined states.

For Anderson, this ambiguity allows him to propose a broader conception of that affect that goes beyond either affect, considered as externally stemming from the objective world, without narrative or meaning; or emotion, considered as an internal subjective state that arises with its own stories and meanings. However, for the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, it is not the difference between affects and emotion

⁶⁹ Anderson’s usage of “prepersonal or transpersonal intensities” follows Massumi’s understanding of affect. See Brian Massumi. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002).

⁷⁰ Anderson also follows Deleuze to consider affect as “becomings” that are “experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states.” See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Trans. by R. Hurley (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1988).

⁷¹ This is part of Dufrenne’s conceptualization of the affective capacity of aesthetics. Andersen takes this idea beyond aesthetics to understand the ways that objective and subjective worlds meet in his creation of affective atmospheres. See Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. by Casey, E., Anderson, A. Domingo, W., Jacobson, L. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press: 1973 [1953]).

and that concerns them, but the bringing together of subject and object into states of non-duality. While we attend to the sonic imaginations and contemplations of both textual traditions, we will thus keep in mind the ways as they are bringing together sensory environments and idealized perceptions of living beings to produce affective atmospheres that generate Buddhist transcendent experiences for their audiences. In the way that such atmospheres are not any one of their parts, none of these imaginations or contemplations will individually reveal the atmospheres produced by both texts. Nor will I seek to anachronistically impose such concepts of atmospheres onto the worlds of the texts. Thus, we will return to this idea at the conclusion of this dissertation, using it to support our reflections of the larger imaginative and contemplative projects for these texts.

0.3 Traditions and Texts

0.3.1 Nyingma Tantra

The locus for this study is the *Nyingma* (or Ancient) sect of Tibetan Buddhism, for which the two textual traditions, *The Unimpeded Sound* and *The Secret Matrix* tantras, are arguably the most important tantric traditions in their foundational role in the critical 11th-12th centuries of the Tibetan Renaissance. However, this tradition is not homogeneous. It has two major ideologies at play, Mahāyoga (*rnal byor chen po*) and the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*), the foundational texts of which are *The Secret Matrix* and *The Unimpeded Sound* tantras, respectively. Mahāyoga is built on effortful practice, aesthetics of violence and sexuality, complex models of the body's interior (aerodynamic, hydraulic, photic, sonic), and a complex ritual quest for the transformation of bliss and rage. The Great Perfection, on the other hand, relies on an aesthetics of naturalness, ease, and spontaneity, a critique of intellectual and ritual complexity, and a contemplative orientation towards

release and emergent visions. It presents a reality made of light circulating within human physiology until contemplative actions trigger its external manifestation in visionary experiences of the divine.

While these models would seem to be in significant tension with each other, together they constitute the mainstream of a single tradition. Matthew Kapstein has explored this hybrid character of the Nyingma tradition through their respective framing foundational narratives: the violent taming of a demon and the effortless liberation of a primordial Buddha.⁷² In this dissertation, I will complement this initial work by exploring the relation between Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection through the pivotal role of sound in philosophical theories and contemplative practices, an endeavor that will illuminate the ways sound can function as the core of religious traditions.

Tantra coheres around a number of core themes, including dominion, sexuality, time, light – and sound. In the Indian yoginī tantras, for example, sexuality is used as the underlying principle for interaction with the divine,⁷³ including functioning as the basis for initiations, ritual offerings, group interaction, the attainment of superhuman powers, and achievement of liberation itself. In the *Wheel of Time* tantra, time is instead used as the central metaphor to describe the inner workings of the body and its divine qualities in relation to the temporality of the universe.⁷⁴ In contrast, ideas and practices of sound are central to *The Unimpeded Sound* and *The Secret Matrix* tantric traditions. For both, sound

⁷² Matthew Kapstein, "Samantabhadra and Rudra: Myths of Innate Enlightenment and Radical Evil," in *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 163-178.

⁷³ David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁷⁴ Vesna A. Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratāntra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

creates the universe and is part of its fundamental nature. They present it as intrinsic to the natural elements, the gods, and our own mental and physical makeup, and describe the transformative power of sound to change our bodies and bring forth divine beings. Both also use sound in practical and experiential modes, whether through listening to the elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and space), cosmogenesis through bits of divine language, healing through somatically located mantric particles, exploring the six forms of life through six syllables, spontaneously yielding to a bizarre range of emergent sounds, chanting liturgy, playing ritual music, and much more. In this way, sound pervades both traditions, creating a distinctive sonic understanding of the world and a foundation on which the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism formed.

I will thus investigate Nyingma tantra through these foundational representatives of its two major forms to reconstruct the specific roles, practices, and worldviews surrounding sound in the 11th-12th centuries. This investigation will also reflect on the complementary and divergent roles of sound in a larger Nyingma sensory model. Both Nyingma traditions of the Great Perfection and Mahāyoga have long been held to be vision-centered, with the visionary experiences of the *Direct Crossing* and the visualization practices of deity yoga respectively. However, these texts foreground sonic contemplations instead. This raises a host of questions for this tradition. How does a focus on sound and the aural sense in two foundational texts for the tradition connect to or problematize these paradigms? Does this occur in the same way within both sub-traditions or does each find a different way to understand the role of sound? What will an understanding of the uniform and divergent ways these traditions deal with sound tell us about the relationship of these traditions in the 11th-12th centuries? Do we find a series of

loosely connected texts and authors that reactively unite under the same banner, as Ronald Davidson describes the Nyingma sect during this time period?⁷⁵ Or do we see a web of traditions with deep interconnectivity around the nexus of sound, similar to Guy Beck's thesis on Indian Hinduism?⁷⁶

0.3.2 The Texts

The central primary sources I will be focusing on are *The Unimpeded Sound Tantra* (*sgra thal 'gyur*) and its commentary, *The Secret Tantra of the Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* (*sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*), as well as *The Secret Matrix Tantra* (*guhagarbha, gsang ba'i snying po*) and its commentary, *The Sun's Quintessence* (*nyi ma snying po*). These texts, in particular the commentaries, are massive works. I have thus targeted sections specifically relating to sound. I will be using my own translations in this dissertation, looking across the several witnesses to the texts I describe below.

While these various editions are brought to bear in the translation process, I will cite page references for individual texts that either provide the best general reading, or for which the easiest access is available. For the *Secret Matrix*, I will cite the *gting skyes* edition of the Collected Tantras of the Ancient ones (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*) published in Thimbu,⁷⁷ and for its commentary, the *Sun's Quintessence*, there is only one witness, found in the Katok edition of the *bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*.⁷⁸ For the *Unimpeded Sound*, I

⁷⁵ Davidson. *Tibetan Renaissance*.

⁷⁶ Beck, *Sonic Theology*.

⁷⁷ "Tantr thams cad kyi rtsa bar gyur pa sgyu 'phrul drwa ba gsang ba snying po de kho na nyid nges pa rtsa ba'i rgyud." In *rNying ma rgyud 'bum (gting skyes)*, 14:9–69. Thimbu: Dingo Khyentse Rimpoche, 1975. http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW21518_FBC435. [BDRC bdr:MW21518_FBC435].

⁷⁸ Rdo rje rgyal mtshan. "gsang ba snying po'i 'grel pa nyi ma'i snying po stod cha." In *bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa (kaH thog)*. TBRC W25983. 65: 7 - 604. [chengdu]: [kaH thog mkhan po 'jam dbyangs], [1999]

will cite the Adzom edition,⁷⁹ and for its commentary, the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, I will use the digital input edition created by Tsering Gyamsto⁸⁰ that follows the *bka' ma* lineage of readings.

0.3.2.1 *The Unimpeded Sound Tantra (sgra thal 'gyur)*

The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* (often cited as *sgra thal 'gyur*, though its full title is *rin po che 'byung ba byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud*) is often considered the foundational tantra of the Great Perfection Seminal Heart (*rdzogs chen snying thig*) tradition that traditionally claims both Indian and divine authorship. It is presented as a sermon delivered by the Buddha Vajradhara who gives answers to six sets of questions. It is held to be originally written in Sanskrit and is given a Sanskrit rendition of its title, *ratnākarashabda-mahāprasāṅga-tantranāma*. However, there is no extant Sanskrit edition. The only remaining editions are the Tibetan versions, which are perhaps the only versions ever written if we take this text to be of indigenous Tibetan authorship. If that is the case, it was likely written in the 11th and 12th centuries just prior to its commentary. There are several witnesses to this text including those found in various editions of the *Collected Tantras of the Ancient Ones* and the *Expansive and Extremely Expansive Canonical Teachings*. All of these are in fairly good condition, ranging from roughly eighty to one hundred folios in length. It is possible that there were additional sermons added to the text at a later time, given certain discrepancies from the initial list of questions and the subsequent answers. The text is written in verse with lines of eight

⁷⁹ "(ka) rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud." In *rGyud bcu bdun (a 'dzom par ma)*, 1:3–208. [Dkar Mdzes Bod Rigs Rang Skyong Khul, Dpal Yul Rdzong /]: [A 'dzom Chos Sgar/], 2000.

⁸⁰ Tshe ring rgya mtsho, "pan chen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud," in *snga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, vol. 107-108 (chengdu, si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa, 2009).

syllables and the language vacillates from being easily understandable (though not always in the way the commentator explains it) to highly esoteric, requiring commentary to make even the most basic sense of it. While there is one published translation of this text by Chris Wilkinson, it does not consider the commentary in its readings and cannot be considered representative of traditional understandings of the tantra.

0.3.2.2 The Secret Tantra of the Blazing & Illuminating Lamp (sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud)

The commentary to *The Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is a detailed exegesis of the root tantra. Roughly seven-hundred and fifty folios in length, it provides discussion on each of the sermons as well as the introductory and concluding sections. This text also claims Indian authorship, citing Vimalamitra as the author. However, this is clearly a Tibetan text, likely written in the 11th-12th centuries, possibly by Zhangton Tashi Dorje (*zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje*) who is the revealer of the *Heart Quintessence of Vimalamitra* (*bima snying tig*), another set of Great Perfection texts purportedly authored by Vimalamitra. He also received the *Heart Quintessence of the Great Perfection* from Chetsu Senge Wangchuk (*lce btsun seng ge dbang phyug*, d.u.) who systematized these *Heart Quintessence* teachings, including the *Seventeen Tantras* of which the *Unimpeded Sound* is considered the root text.

This commentary has several witnesses, however these come from only two recension lines. The first, and most common is that found in the *bka ma* versions of the text: the Katok, Payul, Munsel, and Tsering Gyatso versions. The second line comes from an unknown source, however, is considered to originate in Lhasa. Namkha'i Norbu has taken the latter and created a seven-volume edition of the commentary that encompass three versions: the original Lhasa version computer inputted, a version corrected by

Namkha'i Norbu, and a critical edition between the Lhasa and *bka ma* variations. While this work is useful for this project, it is used carefully, as there remain mistakes and omissions in the editions.

0.3.2.3 *The Secret Matrix Tantra (guhyagarbha, gsang ba'i snying po)*

The *Secret Matrix* tantra has remained a theoretical and practical pillar of Tibetan Nyingma Buddhism. As such, there are many extant editions produced in various periods, often combined with commentarial literature. While there are many witnesses, I will mainly be concerned with those from around or before the time of the *Sun's Quintessence* commentary in the 11th-12th century, which could have potentially been used as a reference point to the commentator.

0.3.2.4 *The Sun's Quintessence (nyi ma'i snying po)*

This commentary to the *Secret Matrix Tantra* was composed by Dorje Gyeltsen (*rdo rje rgyal mtshan*, 1137-1226), the second abbot of Katok monastery. While there are other, and more famous, commentaries from this time period, namely Rongzom's (*rong zom chos kyi zang po*) commentary on the tantra, the *Sun's Quintessence* represents a Mahāyoga perspective on the text, as opposed to a Great Perfection view.⁸¹ Dorje Gyeltsen received teachings on the Secret Matrix tantra in the Zur transmission lineage, leading from Zur Shakya Senge (*zur shAkya seng ge*, 1074-1134) through Dzamton

⁸¹ Gyurme Dorje's dissertation on the *Secret Matrix Tantra* offers a history of the various commentarial traditions. He notes that there are two divergent commentarial styles to this tantra, the Zur lineage upholding a strict Mahāyoga reading of the tantra, and Rongzom's lineage, understanding the tantra through a Great Perfection lens. This author of this commentary, *Rdo rje rgyal mtshan*, writes according to the Zur family lineage of Great Yoga readings, coming down from *zur shakya seng ge* to *'dzam ston 'gro ba'i mgon po*, to the author's own teacher, *dam pa bde gshegs shes rab seng ge*. In addition, there are references in the text to it being a primarily Zur tradition based Mahāyoga interpretation.

Drowai Gonpo (*'dzam ston 'gro ba'i mgon po*, d.u.), and finally to Dorje Gyeltsen's teacher and founder of Katok monastery, Dampa Deshek Sherab Senge (*dam pa bde gshegs shes rab seng ge*, 1122-1192). I have found only two published editions of this text, from Dupjung Lama's *bka' ma rgyas pa* and Katok's *bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*. However, these appear to be photo-identical copies of each other. It should be noted that for both of these editions, a scribal error has caused a series of pages to become out of order. Pages 535-540 should be moved in between pages 560 and 561. My translations reflect the correct meaning of the text, though the page numbers still reflect the misprinted editions.

0.4 Dissertation Outline

This dissertation will be organized in three parts. Part One will attend to the sonic imaginations of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras as they explore the mundane world. Part Two will turn to the sonic imaginations of transcendence in both texts. And Part Three will focus on the sonic contemplations for both traditions that mobilize these imaginations. Each part will feature two chapters. The first chapter in each part will describe the ways these texts construct and orient towards sonic imagination and contemplation. The second chapter in each part will then turn to interpretive reflections on those materials, organized as explorations of the four discourses in which I contend the texts are making philosophical moves – ontological, epistemological, cosmological, and soteriological. The conclusion to the dissertation will bring the insights gained on sonic imaginations and contemplations together to reflect on the ways these traditions produce sensory atmospheres that affect practitioners and enact acoustic awakening.

Part One

Sonic Imaginations of the Mundane World

Thus, have I heard... This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness, and unease are suffering; ... in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering. This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence which, associated with delight and greed, delights in this and that, namely the thirst for the objects of sense desire... – The Buddha⁸²

One went south to the Foothills of Confusion and built Dictionopolis, the city of words; and one went north to the Mountains of Ignorance and built Digitopolis, the city of numbers. ... King Azaz insisted that words were far more significant than numbers and hence his kingdom was truly the greater, and the Mathemagician claimed that numbers were much more important than words and hence his kingdom was supreme. They discussed and debated and raved and ranted until they were on the verge of blows, when it was decided to submit the question to arbitration by the princesses [Rhyme and Reason]. – The Phantom Tollbooth.

Introduction

The suffering of the mundane world is at the foundation of Buddhist inquiry. The first truth of the nobles announces this fact, while the second investigates its roots. 1500 years later, Tibetan Buddhists are concerned with the same question. What is the nature of this mundane world? Where does it come from and what does it contain? However, in the 11th-12th centuries, Nyingma tantra also has a new curiosity. If the senses give rise to such suffering, might they be used to address it?

In Part One of this dissertation, I will investigate the ways the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras seek to answer these questions. These texts both present novel

⁸² Rupert Gettin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1998).

imaginations of the mundane world according to sound and hearing, though they chart distinct paths. The *Secret Matrix* tantra, a core Mahāyoga text for the Nyingma tradition, envisions a world that aligns with, and stems from, the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, foundational for Nyingma's Great Perfection tradition, listens to the sounds of the elements and the material sensory environments to understand the sonorities that make up the world and ourselves.

Chapter One will attend to the traditions individually to excavate the ways they are producing such mundane sonic imaginations. Chapter Two will look at these texts interpretively and comparatively. I argue that both texts are advancing claims about the mundane world in ontological, epistemological, and cosmological ways, though each tradition making distinct choices to accomplish these goals.

First, we will excavate the sonic ontological touchstones both texts are using. I contend that a foundational part of both traditions' sonic imaginations is their use of sound and sonic systems as references and organizational structures. They are able to imagine the mundane world according to the ways it aligns with sound. For the *Secret Matrix*, we will dig through the letter correspondences for the Sanskrit alphabet. Each letter and letter family resonate with particular typologies and aspects of the mundane world. I argue that the structure of the Sanskrit alphabet is the guiding principle that organizes the *Secret Matrix*'s imagination around the mundane world. Likewise, we will find that the *Unimpeded Sound* uses similar sonic ontological touchstones to organize its imagination of the mundane world in the *Five Descents of Sound*. However, unlike the explicitly linguistic and alphabetical structure used in the *Secret Matrix*, we will uncover a more holistic approach to sonic ontology that incorporates not only language, but also

enumerations, aesthetics, materiality, and doctrine. This holistic representation of the ways sound appears in the world is then used as a platform for holistically understanding the nature of this mundane world through its epistemology and cosmology.

Next, we will explore the ways these texts develop an epistemology of concealment. The mundane world is traditionally marked in Buddhism by ignorance. It is even called completely concealed (*kun rdzob*) according to doctrines of the two truths in Buddhism.⁸³ Here, we will explore how the *Secret Matrix* employs Buddhist philosophies of language to articulate its claim that mundane linguistic sound conceals reality. Following tropes in traditional Indian logical debate, it will examine a pot to determine that the name “pot” bears no true significance to the external reality. This, in turn, leads to a standard Buddhist conclusion about language – that it is erroneous. I find that they take these notions about language and apply them to their letter correspondences, such that the delusions faced in the mundane world can all be linked to bits of language. While the *Unimpeded Sound* shares this skepticism about language and its capacity for concealment, it finds other sounds as concealing as well. In particular, it turns to the material sounds of the natural world and examines the ways that they reify and substantiate our separation of subject and object. As the sounds of the natural elements are central to the *Unimpeded Sound*'s imaginative and contemplative projects, I argue that the text is underscoring a baseline delusional reality which will be overturned in the transcendent imagination and the contemplations that allow one to truly know reality through these very sounds.

Finally, I find that both texts are creating cosmologies of the mundane world with

⁸³ See Kapstein, “Chapter 8: The Trouble with Truth” in *Reason's Traces*.

reference to sound. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, this cosmology is charted across an axis of subjectivity and externality, whereby the outer objective world, the “container” (*snod*) in traditional Tibetan cosmologies, is separated from the subjects of beings who live within it, its “contents” (*bcud*). The external world is mapped according to the elements, sensory objects, and time, while beings are understood via traditional Buddhist concepts of the five psycho-physical aggregates, their sensory perception, the six types of beings, their concordant afflictive emotions, and their bodies. For both the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound*, these aspects and relationships of the world and living beings are organized and understood through sound.

Chapter 1: The Sounds of Mundane Imagination

1.1 The *Secret Matrix*

The Secret Matrix tantra and its commentary, *The Sun's Quintessence*, devote their entire fourth chapters to the formation of their sonic imagination. These play out at both the mundane and transcendent levels, which are envisioned as intertwined across the *Secret Matrix's* alphabetical soundscape. Here, we will focus on the ways the *Secret Matrix* builds, considers, and reveals an imagination of the mundane world mapped across the Sanskrit alphabet.

We will attend to two main sections of the chapter: an introductory framing scene and the letter index. The introductory framing scene provides narrative and ideological background to the idea of sound in the form of letters emerging into the world, residing in our bodies, confusing us through language, but also vibrating with enough intensity to shake off the delusional mundane world. Thus, the letters are heard to be both the cause of, and the solution to, the problem of the mundane world.

The letter index gives precise correlations, causations, and organizations to the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and the many ways they appear as our conceptualizations of both the external material mundane world and the beings who reside within it. Normative Buddhist concepts such as the five psycho-physical aggregates that constitute a being and the five natural elements of the material world are encoded onto Sanskrit letter families. They are further paired with each other, such that all of the internal organizations of beings, including their aggregates and sensory perceptions, meet their external counterparts in the form of the elements, sensory objects, and so forth. Moreover, all of these letters and mundane concepts are said to arise from the all-ground of reality,

signified by the letter *A*. Thus, we are able to witness the sonic emergence of our mundane delusions from the dynamism of reality.

These introductions and indexes will provide us insight into the ways the *Secret Matrix* is constructing and connecting their view of a dynamically emerging mundane world through sound. They will also demonstrate the ways the *Secret Matrix* considers the expressivity of sound. We will find this play out both in the form of language that limits us to our mundane concepts, concealing reality from us; and vibrations that can free us from such delusion, leading us to transcendence. Finally, through understanding the logics being used by the *Secret Matrix*, we will be able to reflect on the ways their chosen medium of inquiry – sound and language – impact their imagination of the mundane world.

1.1.1 A Framing Scene

The framing scene in the commentary follows the introduction to the root chapter in which the Wheel Garland of Letters emerges into the world, and through which all things of the mundane world are seen and heard as being merely names and thus lacking inherent existence. The commentary addresses these ideas through classic Indian linguistic logic, a sonic map the body, and a depiction of waves of sound shaking the world to its core. Thus, the mundane world is presented as sonically constructed and faulty through language and embodiment, through disrupted vibrational revelation of the very letters that caused straying in the mundane world.

1.1.1.1 Linguistic Logic

The root tantra begins with a narrative framing for the emergence the phenomenal world through the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet.

The so-called Wheel-Garland of Letters, in which all phenomena [are shown to] persist merely as names, overflowed [into the world] from the awakened body, speech, and mind that are indestructible.

The Secret Matrix, Chapter 4

The commentary explains how all phenomena are related to the letters of the alphabet through a linguistic argument which finds phenomena lacking any truly established essence. Following Indian forms of linguistic philosophical analysis, named phenomena (classically a pot is used for such analysis) are examined to find whether or not they truly exist. If not, all we are left with is the sound of their names:

“All phenomena abide merely as names” means that all things of the mundane world and transcendence, mind and object, inner and outer, exist in their essence as designations. Though the concepts [of the mundane world including the five aggregates, the five elements and so forth] seem to persist with stability, they lack essential existence.

For example, if you search for the characteristics of the thing called ‘a pot,’ you don’t find a pot on the outside, nor on the inside, nor in between. Due to this reasoning, [the name] ‘pot’ is not proven to be [an actual] pot. Thus, [the existence of a pot] is separate from the conceptional designation, ‘a pot.’

Like the thing called ‘pot,’ which is not proven to fundamentally [exist], all phenomena [also] are merely appearances and are not proven to essentially [exist]. Thus, they can only be mere sounds. Therefore, it is said that “for all designations of the mundane world and transcendence there are letters.”

Therefore, the text says “wheel” which is continuous without interruption. All inner and outer phenomena also are without interruption in their unceasing self-appearance. Likewise, the forty-two letters also are not interrupted in the face of those to be tamed. Therefore, it is called a “wheel.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 324.6-325.5

The commentary briefly sketches some scaffolding for the world, which exists along polarities of mundane and transcendent, mind and the objects the mind perceives, and inner beings and outer environments. These poles give us initial insight into how reality is being constructed for the *Secret Matrix* and foreshadow the zones in which sound will help generate and collapse phenomenal reality. The mundane aspects of these will all be

laid out according to a Buddhist catalogue of concepts of the world to be introduced in the letter index below. Here though, the commentary endeavors to show that all those concepts lack true existence, even though they appear to be stable in our experience.

The commentary seeks to accomplish this by proving that phenomena lack existence outside of naming conventions, using the classic Indian philosophic example of a pot. The commentator takes us through this mock examination of the pot, looking at its outside, inside, and perhaps even cracking it open to look in between. However, presumably we don't find this thing we call 'a pot' in any of those places. This appears to be a shorthand argument that takes up earlier Buddhist philosophical discourse, likely that would be recognizable by a monastically educated Tibetan audience. In longer forms of this argument, such as when Nagāsenā famously showed King Milinda in the *Milindapanha* that a chariot was not the thing we call 'chariot' by breaking it apart and finding the chariot in none of its individual pieces, and nothing beyond its individual pieces. It is found instead to be empty of inherent existence. By performing a short form of such arguments, the *Sun's Quintessence* can call upon such linguistic analyses to quickly lead its audience to the conclusion that the names we give phenomena are not actually connected to inherently existent things. We thus have made an error in our judgment of the mundane phenomenal world by thinking that the names we use have actual referents. Language has caused us to stray.

With this in mind, the commentary turns back to sound. If phenomena are really just the names we give to erroneous experiences of the world, then phenomena are actually nothing but sounds. These sounds come in a particular form for the *Secret Matrix* – the letters of the alphabet, the foundation of language. Thus, the tantra plays with sound in its

linguistic valence, locating the misguided straying of sentient beings in the mundane world squarely in the domain of sonic language.

Finally, the commentary takes up the term wheel from the root tantra to describe how this process of sonic language emerging into the world and leading to erroneous straying is continuous. As we will cover in our discussion on transcendence, reality in its dynamism never ceases to appear, and neither do the sounds of the letters. Thus, as long as there are appearances and we have linguistic sounds to give them name, we will stay stuck in the loop of erroneously labeling and reifying the phenomena we witness as our sentient selves and environments. In this way, the mundane world continuously appears but without meaningful impact, like a wheel spinning in circles.

As we will hear later, this continuity also has transcendent potential (weaponized wheels can cut as well as spin). But for now, the continuous sounds of the forty-two letters of language lead ever and again to the mundane world.

1.1.1.2 Sonic Physiology

The commentary takes time here to address other concerns around letters, such as their placement within human bodies:

The site of letters: the site of [letters] emerging [into the world] is the navel, which is called the wheel of Samantabhadrī. Therefore, the navel is also the root of all the energetic channels of the body. The navel is even the root for all the channels of the senses which illuminate. As it says in the Mañjuśrī-Nāma-Saṃgīti, “A is supreme among all letters. It is the sublime letter [that has] great meaning. It is the unborn that emerges from within.” Thus, when [that] letter is expressed, the singular letter A emerges from its site at the navel. When [A] reaches the tongue, it changes to different letters. Therefore, A comes [into verbal expression] within the letter Ka and all [other] expressed sounds, making it the “supreme letter.”

*The [family] groups of letters emerge from A. When the tongue [hits] the roof [of the throat], it appears as the five letters **Ka, Kha, Ga, Gha,** and **Nga.** [This is to say that when] the light rays of A reach the throat, they appear as the five letters*

*[of the **Ka** family] – **Ka, Kha** and so forth. Therefore, this group of five letters emerges from the throat.*

*When the light rays of **A** reach the tongue [connecting with] the roof [of the soft palate], they appear as the group of five **Ca** [family] letters [– **Ca, Cha, Ja, Jha,** and **Nya**]. Therefore, those five letters emerge from [the flat of] the tongue.*

*When the light rays of **A** reach the tip of the tongue, it appears as the group of ten **Ta** [family] letters, [including the five retroflex **Ṭa** family letters – **Ṭa, Ṭha, ḍa, ḍha,** and **ṇa** – and the five dental **Ta** family letters – **Ta, Tha, Da, Dha,** and **Na**]. Therefore, those emerge from the tip of the tongue.*

*The shining light rays of **A** appear as the five **Pa** [family] letters [– **Pa, Pha, Ba, Bha,** and **Ma** –] in reliance on the lips. [Therefore,] those emerge from the lips.*

*The light rays of **A** appear as [the remaining] twenty letters via emanating in objects external [to the mouth]. **Ya** is from the two calves. **Wa** is from the waist. **Ra** is from the hips. **La** is from the two shoulders. **Śa** is from the light at the heart center. **Ṣa** is from the palms of the hands. **Sa** is from the hair tuft. **Ha** is from the soles of the feet. **Kṣa** is from the secret place. The two **I**'s are from the two eyes. The two **U**'s are from the two ears. The two **E**'s are from the teeth. The two **O**'s are from the two nostrils. The head mark is from the crown protrusion. The shad [punctuation] is from the center of the forearm. This is in keeping with the verses from the Compendium of Knowledge.*

The Sun's Quintessence, 326.2-327.5

This passage maps the sounds of the alphabet according to a combination of two physiological models that both locate the letters in the body and find the body as the site for letters' sonic expression. The first model is the Sanskrit organization of the alphabet according to the location in the mouth where the sounds are produced. The **Ka** family is found in the throat because that is where the sounds of **Ka, Kha, Ga** and so forth are created. By placing the tongue onto the back of the throat, these sounds emerge with their five individual characteristics. These begin with the unvoiced, unaspirated sound **Ka**. When aspiration (a kind of breathing sound indicated by the use of 'h' in a letter) is included, this becomes **Kha**. If instead the original sound is voiced (whereby the vocal cords vibrate), the sound **Ga** arises. If it is both aspirated and voiced, one gets **Gha**. And

finally, if the sound is pronounced nasally, as in through the nose, we hear the sound, *Nga*.

This pattern of five different letters continues in each letter family, each of which is classically designated with the part of the mouth used in its creation. Thus, while the *Ka* family uses the throat as the site of articulation, the *Ca* family (pronounced ‘cha’) relies on the flat of the tongue hitting the soft palate. Likewise, the retroflex *Ta* family is produced via placing the tip of the tongue back onto the hard palate (a sound unfamiliar to English and mostly Tibetan speakers), the members of the dental *Ta* family are made through hitting the tip of the tongue to the back of the teeth, and the *Pa* family resounds from the lips coming together.

Each of these letters are considered to possess the inherent vowel *A*. This means that when they are produced, they naturally come with a short *A* vowel. This is not something that we consider in English. For us, the letter *T* is just the letter *T* – no vowel included. However, actually when we say “*T*” in English, we are actually saying “Tee,” including the “ee” vowel within the letter. When heard in this way, our alphabet sounds like a jumbled mess of vowels! The Sanskrit (and Tibetan) alphabet strive to keep their letters as separate from their vowels as possible, a feature of the language that coemerges with its orthography (vowels are written above and below letters, which in turn must stay neutrally vocalic). However, this is not entirely possible in the recitation of the letters of the alphabet – they need some vowel in order to be pronounced. Thus, each of the letters includes the short form of the vowel *A* as an inherent neutral vowel.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ This incited considerable religious speculation when language was considered according to its connection with reality and the divine. In Indian tantric and linguistic philosophies, the letter *A* became synonymous with reality as the source of the manifest world and a quality inherent in all phenomena. This

The second model this passage uses to map a sonic physiology is combines sound with a photic model of the body. The inclusion here of light moving along pathways within the body evokes other photic, thermo-dynamic, and even hydraulic tantric physiologies in Tibetan Buddhism. Many of these models also place letters or mantric syllables with the body which is mapped with channels (*rtsa*) and energy hubs (*'khor lo*) and focus on a primary hub residing at the navel. For example, in the famous heat-yoga practice, *gtummo*, the site of heat generation is a vertical line (called the *A 'thung*, or short *A*) located at the navel. In that practice, heat and light are generated from the letter and move up a central vertical channel in the body, whereby it melts another letter at the crown of the head which drips down, initiating a hydraulic model of the body, and eventually producing experiences of bliss.

In this presentation of sonic physiology in the *Secret Matrix*, the letter *A* itself resides at the navel. Light emits from it and travels up⁸⁵ to the sites in the mouth where the consonants are formed based on the Sanskrit system of letter vocalization detailed above. Thus, when the light of *A* hits the throat, it produces the *Ka* family, when it hits the tongue it makes the *Ca* family, and so forth. However, this photic model unfolds into a larger physiology of letters within the body after the twenty-five family letters in the mouth. The remaining letters, including the four semivowels, three sibilants, aspirate, compound, eight vowels,⁸⁶ and even two punctuation marks are mapped out across the

will be discussed more in the second chapter of this dissertation on transcendence, however, broader discussion of this is beyond the scope of this work. See for reference, Andre Padoux, Vac, and Guy Beck, *Sonic Theology*.

⁸⁵ Presumably along similar pathways as the central channel featured in *gtummo* and many other tantric physiologies.

⁸⁶ The text uses slightly different methodologies for considering the number of vowels. Sometimes, six vowels will be referred to as that number better fits the letter index, even though there are more vowels.

body. These letters appear when the light of *A* travels from the navel to different parts of the body including the calves, waist, hips, shoulders, heart center, palms, hair tuft,⁸⁷ soles of the feet, and genitals. Further, the vowels are coded with the sensory organs: long and short *I* with the eyes, the two *U*'s for the ears and so forth. Finally, grammatical and text particles are included, as they are in later discussions of the alphabet. The head character marking the beginning of texts and pages is in the crown protrusion and the *shad* character denoting the end of a phrase is at the center of the cubit-length forearm.

In this passage, we find that sound is the medium of inquiry for the body, which in tantric Buddhism has been investigated in a variety of ways. As we discussed above, other systems consider the body as photic, thermo-dynamic, and hydraulic, not to mention the body as simply physical and material. The physiology of this passage seems to take up pathways (literal and figurative) formed by these other, more common tantric physiologies, combining them with the Sanskritic physiological organizations of letter families, to sonically, linguistically, and photically map out the body. While keeping a sonic focus, the mixing of these models places the generation of sound at the navel, as is found in other tantric physiologies. In this case the letter *A* is located there, marking its significance in the emergent process of the other letters of the alphabet. While the

There are even more vowels in Sanskrit than the eight presented here, though the *Secret Matrix* does not make use of the short and long vocalic *R* and *L*'s.

⁸⁷ This and the Crown Protrusion below are interesting inclusions for this sonic physiology. Hair-tuft (*mdzod spu, ūrṇā*) and Crown Protrusion (*gtsug tor, uṣṇīṣa*) are two of the major distinguishing marks of a Buddha. However, the rest of these locations seem to portray a normal mundane body, and the point of the passage seems to revolve around the ways letters reside in and are produced from the body following generally ordinary Sanskritic understandings of that process. It is possible that this mapping of a photic tantric body is following other similar systems in which one generates themselves in a transcendent body before mapping it with channels and so forth. The inclusion of Buddha marks could thus indicate that while the mundane body is used to produce sounds, the transcendent body is also active in the process of storing and creating letters. This would be another instance of the mundane and transcendent worlds collapsing together in a sonic domain.

implication is that the sound of *A* travels to these different body locations and is thus inherent in each letter's sound, instead light emits from the letter, helping to solidify its connection with these other photic systems. The locations in the mouth identified by Sanskrit morphology then become key sites where the light of *A* transforms into the sounds of the five letter families. The pathways of *A*'s light along channels of the body also results in sounds being located all over the physical body, including in the knees, waist, and palms. While we began with the vocalized organization of Sanskrit, the photic body model allows the text to expand out across the body. However, because the medium and goal of the inquiry is primarily sonic and linguistic, we find letters at the end of these channels of light.

1.1.1.3 Vibrational Revelation

The commentary then discusses the ways the letters “overflow” (*phyung*) into the world, presenting their vibrational power. This section takes up the *Secret Matrix*'s claim regarding the limits linguistic sound imposes on the world – that phenomena are merely nominal in their nature rather than substantial. The previous section sought to prove this through logical and linguistic methodology. Here, it both reinforces that claim and offers an explanation for how the linguistic sounds of the alphabet can instead break through those limits in a vibrational epistemology at the cosmological level.

The Power (mthu) of the Letters' Emergence is as such: They “overflow” [into the world], meaning that from the awakened mind of Samantabhadra, from the intention of his awareness, these letters of awakened speech overflow as appearances for the retinue with an open understanding (go phye ba'i 'khor). “The ten directions of the six worlds” refer to cosmic fields [in the ten directions in which there are the] six abodes of the six classes of beings... “Limitless” means that for those worlds, there are no boundaries.

The letters are described as overflowing into a holistic view of the world filled with

beings. The “ten directions” is a common Buddhist cosmological term to denote the entirety of mundane existence. The “six types of beings,” likewise, subsume all the beings of the mundane world.⁸⁸ These sounds thus echo across limitless worlds and beings, and will shake them to their core.

“Vibrating in six types (rnam pa drug tu g.yos)” refers to the activities of miraculously appearing phenomena, which actualizes as the ground vibrating. In terms of internal [beings], those on the path will be raised to a higher stage (sa) of awakening. Externally, the [material] earth shakes. These two are combined in this presentation.

Externally, “vibrating (g.yos)” means that the earth shakes a little bit.

“Extremely vibrating (rab tu g.yos)” is stronger than that. “Entirely vibrating (kun tu g.yos)” is vibrating in all directions.

The [rest] of the six ways [of vibrating] are discussed in a [similar] manner. More intense than vibrating is shaking (‘gul ba) More intense than that is extremely shaking. More intense than that is the total shaking of the outer [environment] and inner [beings] – entirely extreme shaking.

Still more intense is a [relatively] small [buzzing] sound, “ur ur.” A greater sound than that is extreme buzzing. A greater sound than that is entirely extreme buzzing that resounds all through the [external] world and its [inner] contents [of beings].

Greater than that is a [thundering] sound, “chem chem.” It has the power to destroy material things, even though it is the first and smallest [of this category]. Greater than that is extreme thunder. Greater than that is entirely extreme thunder that [sounds] like it is destroying everything in the world and its contents.

Greater than that is the [boulder rattling] sound, “shig shig,” which is head-piercing [sound] that destroys all material things. Quickly destroying [them is the sound of] extreme boulder rattling. Greater than that is the entirely extreme [sound] of boulder rattling that completely obliterates the world and its contents.

Greater than that, is the sound [of the howling tornado], “tor tor,” which carries away all material things with its wind. Greater than that is the extreme tornado howl. Greater than that is the entirely extreme tornado howl which uproots the world and its contents. In that way, those miraculous events appear in the

⁸⁸ At least those in the Desire Realm, which is the most common, populous, and afflicted of the three realms.

material world. These are the blessings of the dynamic qualities of the appearing garland of letters.

Sound is described as emerging into and affecting the world along the two poles of external environment and internal beings that we find throughout the text. Externally, there are eighteen levels of sonic vibration, segmented into six groups of three, that grow ever more intense. The first two groups are described as “vibrating” and “shaking” respectively, and the remaining four are given specific onomatopoeic sounds that roughly correlate to buzzing, thundering, boulder rattling, and tornado howling.

Many of these sounds directly stem from descriptions of the sixty qualities of the Buddha’s speech, including the three levels of vibrating (*g.yos ba*) and shaking (*’gul ba*), as well as the thundering and rattling sounds of “*ur ur*” and “*chem chem*.”⁸⁹ These sounds align with efficacy of awakening and are thus able to alter the face of the world. And as these sounds grow more intense, we are shown their destructive power. They rattle and roar through the external environments and the beings within, destroying the material world (or at least our understanding of it) in the process.

As for internal [beings], via the blessings of miraculous appearances of phenomena, [practitioners] on the path have their training in dynamic awareness vibrated in these six ways [as well]. The first two [types of vibration – vibrating and shaking – affect] those on the path of accumulation. The third [type of vibration – buzzing – affects] those on the path of joining. The fourth [type of vibration – thundering – affects] those on the path of seeing. The fifth [type of vibration – boulder rattling – affects] those on the path of meditation. And the sixth [type of vibration – scattering – affects] those on the path of finality.

These sounds also affect beings within these worlds. As shown above, mundane beings can be destroyed by these ever-increasing dins. However, Buddhist practitioners

⁸⁹ These are also listed in the first sermon of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra. Its commentary that the sixty melodious qualities of the Buddha’s voice. See *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp* 90.2-94.5.

seem to be affected by these sounds in particular ways. The passage aligns the six modes of vibration to normative Buddhist categorizations of stages on the path and portends that these practitioners will advance to higher stages through the power of these sounds emerging into the world. Initially, the text implicates the bhūmi's, a ten-fold system of Buddhist accomplishment. However, in this passage, we are given the details of a five-fold system of paths, onto which the six vibrations are mapped. From least to most accomplished, the paths are those of accumulation, joining, seeing, meditation, and finality. The different categories of sonic destruction are said to vibrate these practitioners' awareness, whereby they advance to the next stage. This can be considered an internal process of destroying the delusion of beings (as discussed below) instead of external material things, both of which happen simultaneously as the letters overflow into the world and phenomena are sundered into their mere names.

*By the power of these miraculous events, “**all phenomena become merely nominal characteristics.**” All phenomena of the container [world] and its contents of [beings], and of the mundane world and transcendence are free from all limits of mentally [defined] characteristics, and as such are not established [as truly existing]. Like the people who eat psychotropic herbs (thang phrom, dhatūra) and see many [visual] forms in the sky, although [external] objects and mind appear on their face to be deluded [mundane] concepts, they are only names and are not proven to exist. [While] this has always been the case, it is through the power of letters that the delusion [of existent phenomena] is purified. In the state of abiding [reality], phenomena become nothing but mere nominal characteristics, without any apprehension of an essence. This is the dynamism of awakened qualities [of the garland of letters appearing in the world].*

The Sun's Quintessence, 336.1-4

Finally, the passage brings these descriptions of sound's violent emergence into the world toward the text's epistemological argument – that the mundane concepts of the world and beings that we grasp onto are only delusions. They have no substantial

existence. This was shown through a linguistic epistemological argument above, in which sound as language was shown to misrepresent the world and thus lead to delusion. The passage here targets that same conclusion but uses vibrations moving through a material world to shake its core. As the sounds of the letters rattle and disrupt the material world and the beings within, they cease to exist in the ways we think they do. They are freed from our linguistically defined limits and disintegrate without language holding them together. All that is left, the text says, is their names. And while this is in accordance with a fundamental reality that precedes these letters, it is only through the sounds of the letters materially sweeping through and destroying the world that we might experience this. Just as sounds and language have the capacity to conceal, it appears that sound can materially act on mundane environments and beings to dispel such confusion.

1.1.2 *The Letter Index*

The main section of the fourth chapter for both the tantra and commentary is the letter index. It corresponds the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet with the forty-two concepts that make up the mundane world and the forty-two deities of the *Secret Matrix* transcendent pantheon. In this chapter, we will focus on the correlations between the letters and the mundane concepts, leaving the deities of the transcendent pantheon for the next chapter. The mundane index is making a holistic claim to cover all the conceptual organizations we make for the world and beings within. It does this through normative Buddhist concepts such as the five psycho-physical aggregates and five elements of the material world, while pairing external and internal conceptual rubrics. As we will witness throughout the short and long versions of the letter index, the forty-two letters give rise to the forty-two concepts of the mundane world and the forty-two deities of the *Secret*

Matrix mandala. These arise as one-to-one correspondences detailed by the letter index. For a full representation of the index, refer to *Appendix, Figure 1*.

1.1.2.1 The Short Letter Index

The root text initially provides the mere alphabet, showing the sonic-linguistic fundamentals from which all things arise, and saving its own letter index for later in the chapter. The commentary, though, gives an overview of these correspondences, labeling them as “The Ways Letters Emerge [into the World].” Here, we see the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet cross-referenced to the forty-two concepts that define and organize the mundane world. When these are purified, they become the forty-two deities, each of which are listed after.⁹⁰

In this short index, we see a preview of the categories of the mundane world into which the *Secret Matrix* organizes its sonic imagination of the mundane. These include: the five psycho-physical aggregates of beings, the five elements of the material world, the five sensory perceptions, the five sensory objects, the five sense organs, the four times, the four wrong-views, and the six realms of beings. In addition to these, the text adds the all-ground (*kun gzhi*) and the sixth form of preceptory consciousness – mental consciousness.

This index is the basis for many of the ways the *Secret Matrix* considers the expressivity of sound as well as its role in the connective construction of the world. Sound in the form of language has the power here to express and give rise to erroneous concepts of the mundane world and the purified beings of transcendence. Following its

⁹⁰ These deities will be discussed further in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

critique of linguistic forms of logical argument above, the commentary roots the problem of straying into the mundane world in the letters themselves. When these linguistic sounds are misunderstood, they become the many ways beings exist in the mundane world marked by suffering. Each conceptual member within a larger Buddhist holistic view of the mundane world can thus be traced back to a sound and letter. Thus, in this mundane imagination, the multifaceted modes of straying are explained in their correspondences to sound, which is playing dual roles as sonic expressions and the basis for linguistic signification – valences we will find throughout the *Secret Matrix*'s sonic imagination.

In addition, this index begins to provide insight into how the text considers the sonic dynamism of reality, coded as *A* here, and the ways in which the mundane and transcendent worlds are constructed and joined. As we will see, this is largely along sensory lines, with the external world and the beings within coming together through the connective domains of sensory perceptions, objects, and organs, as well as the primary Buddhist model for beings, the psycho-physical aggregates, meeting the classic Buddhist rubric for the material world, the elements. These come into existence and pair together through sonic-linguistic pathways of letters. In the next chapter, these mundane connections and transitions between inner and outer will elevate to their transcendent correspondences of the pantheon of deities.

A: in the context of the ground, it is the natural ultimate all-ground. In the context of its perfected essence, it is Samantabhadri.

Ka: ordinary visual perception purifies into Ksitigarbha.

Kha: ordinary aural perception purifies into Akashagarbha.

Ga: [ordinary] olfactory perception purifies into Lord Avalokiteshvara.

- Gha:** [ordinary] gustatory perception purifies into Vajrapani.
- Nga:** body, the [tactile] sense organ, purifies into Yamantaka.
- Ca:** eye, the [visual] sense organ purifies into Maitreya.
- Cha:** ear, the [aural] sense organ purifies into Nirvirana-Vishkambin.
- Ja:** nose, the [olfactory] sense organ purifies into Samatabhadra.
- Jha:** tongue, the [gustatory] sense organ purifies into Vajrapani.
- Nya:** tactile objects purify into Great Power.
- Ṭa:** the form aggregate purifies into Vairochana.
- Ṭha:** the consciousness [aggregate] purifies into Akshobya.
- Ḍa:** the feeling aggregate purifies into Ratnasambhava.
- Ḍha:** the discernment aggregate purifies into Amithaba.
- Ṇa:** the propensities for action aggregate purifies into Amoghasiddhi.
- Ta:** the earth element purifies into Buddha-locana.
- Tha:** the space element purifies into Samatabhadri.
- Da:** the water element purifies into Mamaki.
- Dha:** the fire element purifies into Pandaravasini.
- Na:** the wind element purifies into Tara.
- Pa:** visual forms purify into Lasyema.
- Pha:** sounds purify into Malema.
- Ba:** smells purify into Girtima.
- Bha:** flavors purify into Nirtima.
- Ma:** tactile perception purifies into Hayagriva.
- Ya:** the past purifies into Dhupema (offering goddess of incense).
- ‘A:** the present purifies into Metogma (offering goddess of flowers).
- Ra:** the future purifies into Marmema (offering goddess of butter lamps).
- La:** future generations purify into Drichabma (offering goddess of perfumed water).
- Sha:** the view of eternalism purifies into Angkusha (the iron hook lady).
- Ṣha:** the view of nihilism purifies into Pasa, (the noose lady).

Sa: the view of the self purifies into the Iron Chain Lady.

Ha: the view of a signified [substantial reality] purifies into the Bell Goddess.

Kṣa: mental consciousness purifies into Samantabhadra.

I: jealousy purifies into Subduer of Gods.

Ī: pride purifies into Subduer of Titans.

U: greed purifies into Subduer of Humans.

Ū: desire purifies into Subduer of Tormented Spirits.

E: ignorance purifies into Subduer of Animals.

Ai: hatred purifies into Subduer of Hell-beings.

O Au together become Om: touch consciousness purifies into Amrita Kundali.

The Sun's Quintessence, 332.1-333.5

Here, we are given a clear picture of the mundane world and the basic method of its organization and the ways it corresponds to the letters of the alphabet. The world is primarily broken down into two classifications: the external material world and the beings who inhabit it. The external world consists of the five elements of earth, space, water, fire, and wind;⁹¹ the sensory objects of visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touchable things; and the four times of past, present, future, and future generations.⁹² Beings are considered according to the five psycho-physical aggregates of form, consciousness, feeling, discernment, and propensities for action; the five sensory perceptions of visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile perception (as well as the sixth perception or consciousness (*ṛnam shes*), mental consciousness); the five sense

⁹¹ This listing, and others throughout this index are somewhat out of order. This is because this short-index is organized according to the Sanskrit alphabet instead of normative lists of either concepts or deities. However, the longer letter index reorders these to prioritize the organizational models of the concepts and deities over the alphabet.

⁹² Typically, the fourth time would condense the other three times together or be beyond the scope of time and is generally related to the state of awakening. Here, however, it appears to correspond to future generations of beings (*physis 'byung ba*), though it is unclear how this is distinguished from the future.

organs of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body; and the six afflictions and their corresponding being type – jealousy with gods, pride with titans, greed with humans, desire with tormented spirits, ignorance with animals and hatred with hell-beings. In addition, the index adds the four wrong-views of other doctrinal systems, the views of eternalism, nihilism, the self, and the signified world as substantially real.

Mostly, the correspondences are grouped according to letter class: the **Ka** family with the sensory perceptions, the **Ca** family with the sense organs, the retroflex **Ta** family with the psycho-physical aggregates, the **Ta** family with the elements, the **Pa** family with the sensory objects,⁹³ the sibilants and aspirate with wrong views, and the vowels with the six realms of beings and their afflictive emotions.

These two lists of external and internal generally align with each other, a pattern that will be made clearer in the organization of the longer index and its paired deities. The five personal aggregates, the primary way that beings experience the world, comes together with the five elements, the primary way the material world exists. Likewise, the five sensory perceptions are met by the five sensory objects,⁹⁴ connecting inner experience to the external world.

Sense organs fill a dual role here: they act as an intermediary between sensory perception and sensory objects, and as body parts, they serve as the internal side to another pair. The pairing methodology becomes slightly less obvious here,⁹⁵ but we will

⁹³ The correspondences of the ca and pa family are switched in the longer description. See the discussion on this divergence below.

⁹⁴ There is one caveat here: the tactile perception and object are both used to connect divine wrathful gatekeepers to their consorts who are the purified four wrong-views. This will become more apparent in the next chapter on transcendence.

⁹⁵ These are clarified by their corresponding deities.

find that the four of the sense organs align with the four times (which are also sensory-based offering goddesses). The six afflictions and realms of beings contains its own correspondence system found in normative Tibetan Buddhist ideology, which the *Secret Matrix* leaves intact and without further mundane pairing. Finally, the set of tactile perception, sense organ, sense object, and touch consciousness (*reg shes*), a somewhat enigmatic repetition of tactile perception (*lus kyi rnam shes*),⁹⁶ are paired with the four wrong-views.

This list claims to be a short preview of the letter-index that makes up the bulk of the commentary's chapter. However, there are two factors that distinguish this list: organization and errors. This short index is organized according to the Sanskrit alphabet, and thus begins with the ***Ka*** family. The long index, however, is organized according to the primacy of both the mundane concepts and the transcendent deities. Thus, that list begins with the retroflex ***Ta*** family, which corresponds to both the primary model of beings – the psycho-physical aggregates – and the central deities of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala. In addition, the second letter of that family ***Tha*** is placed first, as it corresponds both the consciousness aggregate (considered the highest aggregate) and the main deity of the maṇḍala, Akshobya. The fact that this short index reorganizes according to the alphabet indicates the importance of the sonic-linguistic system to the commentator in

⁹⁶ There is a slight differentiation in the Tibetan for these terms, *reg shes* indicating the consciousness or perception of touching (*reg*), and *lus kyi rnam shes* indicating the consciousness or perception of the body (*lus*). Elsewhere in the index, the latter model that identifies perception according to organ (eye, ear, and so forth up to body) is used, while touching most closely aligns with descriptions of the sensory objects, which identifies touchable things as *reg bya*. The term *reg pa* contains this dual signification and can both be used as a verb and as a noun, making it somewhat appropriate to use in the term *reg shes*. However, the differentiation between touch consciousness and tactile perception here is not clarified. It is likely that the authors included this correspondence here to align the index according to other needs, such as the four wrathful gatekeepers corresponding to the tactile realm, which initially only had three members.

their understanding of the creation of the *Secret Matrix*'s sonic imagination. For easy comparison between the long and short indexes, please refer to Figure 1 in *Appendix*.

However, the second divergence in this list seems to be due to error rather than intentional choice. The main errors that occur are in the correspondences of the *Pa* and *Ca* families. In the short index, the *Pa* family is associated with the sense objects and the *Ca* family with the sense organs. However, these are reversed, along with their corresponding deities in the long index. Further, the concepts of the tactile sensory domain are mixed up. In the short index, tactile perception corresponds to *Ma*, tactile objects with *Nya*, and the tactile organ with *Nga*. However, in the long index, perception is *Nga*, object is *Ma*, and organ is *Nya*. That these are mistakes rather than choices is evident by the commentary's later correction of these in its explanation of the long index and lack of systematic reasoning or reflection on the difference here. This could be an error on the part of the author, though perhaps it is more likely a scribal error that occurred in the reproductions of this text. As we only have one witness to this 12th century text, it unfortunately remains unclear.

We begin to see here that this alphabetical medium of inquiry affects the texts imaginal horizons for their mundane world. The concepts presented in this index match almost entirely with normative Buddhist ideologies of the mundane world, tracing back to their inclusion in Indian *Abhidharma* materials that deeply inform Buddhist forms of imagination and conceptualization of the world. That is to say, none of the concepts here would be new to most Buddhist scholars and practitioners, perhaps even laity. However, the ways that they are organized here and corresponded to sounds and letters is unique.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ This is not to say such correspondences have never been done. Indian tantric traditions are full of

Typical representation of these concepts occurs in lists that organize according to logical argument, as in Abhidharma literature, or across visual iconographies, seen in other tantric literature. The organization according to the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet provides a new rubric for these tantric writers to imagine the mundane world. A five-fold system neatly aligns Sanskrit letter families with five members to significant Buddhist concepts such as the five psycho-physical aggregates, five elements, and five sensory domains. The pairings between inner and outer are also supported by using the letter rubric, especially for the aggregates and elements. Each uses letters of the retroflex *Ta* and dental *Ṭa* families respectively, which aurally and graphically in Tibetan are nearly identical⁹⁸

Four-fold sub-sections of the alphabet, such as the semi-vowels, also nicely align with four-fold conceptual schema such as the four times. However, we also find the authors exerting creativity in ensuring such alignments. The three sibilants become four with the addition of the aspirate *Ha* in order to correspond to the four wrong views. The vowels are divided so that six of them can correlate to the six afflictions and realms of beings, while two more of them can combine to both include the letter *Om* and identify a dubious fourth tactile mode to further meet the numerical needs of the transcendent portion of the index. Finally, the letter *A*, linguistically theorized as the inherent source for all other letters, presents a handy analogy for the Buddhist concept of *alaya-vijnana* (*kun ghzi*

imagination around letters, around which some scholarship has been done, such as Guy Beck's *Sonic Theology*, but which deserves to further study. However, these sonic correspondences within Tibetan Buddhism between these concepts of the mundane world and the Sanskrit alphabet is formative of sonic imaginations of the mundane world in likely new ways for the Nyingma tradition.

⁹⁸ The sounds are almost indistinguishable for a non-native speaker, and the orthography for the retroflex letters is a simple horizontal reversal of their dental (or normal for Tibetan) counterparts.

rnam shes) as the storehouse consciousness and basis for the arising of all phenomena of mundane existence, as well as the transcendent form of its imagination as the ground (*gzhi*).

1.1.2.2 The Long-Index

During the longer form of the index, the root verses are mainly concerned with the transcendent pantheon. It lists each letter of the alphabet and names the corresponding transcendent deity or issue it is concerned with. For example, the first member of the index reads, “***Tha*** is the adamantine magical emanation itself.”⁹⁹ This is understood by the commentary as primarily a reference to the central deity of the *Secret Matrix* mandala, Akṣobhya, as the words adamantine and magical emanation typically have transcendent valences.

However, other verses provide enough clues for the commentary to organize its index of mundane concepts. The ***Ka*** family, which is concerned with the five sensory perceptions, details that “***Ka*** is the supreme awakened mind of the eye”¹⁰⁰ and so forth. While these identifications lean on transcendent issues, such as the awakened mind and purified versions of the senses,¹⁰¹ the commentary is able to use these rubrics to flesh out the mundane concept to which each letter corresponds, which in this case are the mundane senses.

The issues, questions, and tensions at play for the long form of the letter index are similar to those of the short index discussed previously. How is the expressivity of sound,

⁹⁹ The *Secret Matrix*, 15.2.

¹⁰⁰ The *Secret Matrix*, 15.4.

¹⁰¹ The word “eye,” here, is written in its honorific form, *spyān*, implying that this is the eye of an awakened being rather than an ordinary eye, *mig*. This is the case for the other senses as well.

its ability to communicate and mislead through language, informing the ways this index imagines the mundane world? How does the *Secret Matrix* think with sound to confront the tension of dynamic creation from empty reality? And how are reality's worldly manifestations constructed, organized, and understood through sound? Finally, what are the affordances and limitations of performing such an inquiry through the medium of sound?

The long letter index explores these issues through systematic organization. After detailing the letter *A*, the ground of reality,¹⁰² the commentary follows the alphabetical ordering of the root text as opposed to the normative Sanskrit alphabet given in the short index. It begins with the retroflex *Ṭa* and dental *Ta* families, representing the five psycho-physical aggregates and five material elements respectively. These are followed by the *Ka*, *Ca*, and *Pa* families, which deal with the tripartite sensory domains composed of sensory perception, sensory object, and sense organ. The semi-vowels, *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La*, are coded with ideas of time, while the sibilants *Śa*, *Ṣa*, *Sa*, and aspirate, *Ha*, are described according to the erroneous philosophical views held by other schools of thought. Finally, the vowels, *I*, *Ī*, *U*, *Ū*, *E*, and *Ai*, are imagined according to the six realms of beings and their respective emotional afflictions.

Each letter family is preceded by a short explanation for the whole group. Within the description of individual letters within the index, each has three parts: the letter, the mundane concept, and the deity transcendent pantheon it corresponds to. Here, we will focus on the former two aspects, saving discussion of transcendent deities for the next chapter. The letters are all described according to their phonetical production and their

¹⁰² This will be discussed further in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

relationship with the letter *A*. Likewise, the concepts of the mundane world are phonologically encoded to each letter and further connected to the all-ground, reality (*kun gzhi*).¹⁰³ For quick reference to the larger index, please refer to *Appendix, Figure 2 – the Mundane Letter Index*.

1.1.2.2.1 The *Ta* Family

“Tha is the adamantine magical emanation itself.” ... The corresponding letter [for this] is Ṭha. The letter Ṭha appears via connecting one’s tongue with the [hard] palate, and from the unceasing letter A. Magical means that while it appears, it is not proven [to exist]. Emanation means that while it is non-existent, both [its non-existence] and whatever it arises as are inseparable from each other. [To expand on this, the magical emanation of the letters of the Ṭha family] are the unceasing [appearances of] the [mundane] world that conceals reality. On the other hand, they are an aspect of method, as they are the authentic unceasing appearances of the method [which arises] from A. And since they are inseparable from A, they are called “Adamantine.” The corresponding concept [to Ṭha] is the [psycho-physical aggregate of] the eight collections of consciousness, [which arises] from the unceasing dynamism of the all-ground signified by A.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 358.6-359.5

The retroflex *Ta* family begins, notably, with its second member, the aspirated letter

¹⁰³ The *Sun’s Quintessence* commentary seems to go back and forth between the using *kun gzhi* and *kun gzhi rnam shes*. The former refers to fundamental reality and will be discussed further in the next chapter on transcendence. In the description of the mundane concept corresponding to the letter A, for instance, the commentary identifies this first usage, calling it the ultimate all-ground (*don gyi kun gzhi*), referring to the ultimate level of reality. However, the commentary also uses the term *kun gzhi rnam shes*, the *ālāyavijñāna* or storehouse consciousness instead. This is somewhat of a mundane counterpart to foundational reality, focusing instead on our basic consciousness as the source for all the conceptions of the world and ourselves. In certain ways, this second understanding of *kun gzhi* would make more sense for the commentary to use in its index of mundane concepts and letters. In addition, this reading would be supported both by two instances of this mundane form in the letter indexes for *Na* and *Kha*. It is possible that the text is playing with these dual uses of the term, or possible that the inclusion of these two instances is merely scribal error. I tend to favor the latter reading, in which the commentary cares more about foundational reality than the storehouse consciousness, which is not discussed elsewhere in this chapter. In addition, the transcendent level to the letter A is not simply a move to foundation reality over the storehouse consciousness but finds its transcendent purchase in the figure of Samantabhadrī. If only one move is being made here, and no others are indicated, it is more likely that foundational reality is being used for *A* and as the basis for the arising of the concepts of the mundane world, which the commentary points out repeatedly gives rise to both the mundane world and transcendence.

Tha. Only the pair of *Ta* and *Tha* families begin in this way, as the corresponding concepts and transcendent deities for both *Tha* and *Tha* represent the pinnacles of their respective category. Among the five psycho-physical aggregates that make up a being, the aggregate of consciousness is generally considered the most important by Buddhism, and thus its corresponding letter *Tha*, is first.

The explanation on *Tha* starts at the level of the letter, describing the way the sound is made. The process begins with the letter *A*, as the retroflex sound is stated to come from that unceasing source sound of *A*. When the sound of *A* reaches the conditioning factors (*rkyen*) of the tongue hitting the hard palate, the sound *Tha* is formed. This matches Sanskrit language theory in which *A* is an inherent vowel to each letter and various parts of the mouth provide differentiation between letters. It also corresponds to the previously discussed sonic and photic models of the

The commentary then explains “magical emanation (*sgyu phrul*),” a term in the root text that is the identifying marker for each member of the *Ta* family. Letters are shown to be the appearances of the mundane world which is described as concealing reality (*kun rdzob*). Thus, the letters of the *Ta* family are embroiled in the process of confusion and straying that gives rise to the mundane world in the first place. This idea resonates with the *Secret Matrix*’s previous discussions of the limits of language – how names do not map onto reality and lead to confusion.

However, the opposite also seems to be true. The passage calls these letters “an aspect of method (*thabs*).” Method generally has a positive value: it is used to describe a Buddha’s ‘skillful means’ in teaching, by which diverse paths to awakening are shown for diverse inclinations. It is also paired with wisdom (*shes rab*), as coemergent qualities

and abilities of an awakened being. This pairing also becomes a euphemism for the sexual pairing of male and female consort, where method is masculine, and wisdom is feminine. We will see this play out in the next chapter on transcendence, where we find the male consorts of retroflex *Ta*, and method, paired with the female consorts of dental *Ta*, and wisdom. For now, though, the *Ta* family letters are identified according to their capacity to help free beings from this mundane world of concealed reality as authentic (*mtshan nyid*) manifestations of the unceasing method that stems directly from true reality, signified by the letter *A*.

Tha also corresponds to a concept of the mundane world. The concepts presented in the letter index are normative Buddhist rubrics to understand the mundane world and the beings within. Arguably the most important rubric to understand beings is the five psycho-physical aggregates: form, sensation, discrimination, propensities for action, and consciousness. According to traditional Buddhist philosophy, these aggregates, and nothing else, make up our (confused) experience of ourselves and our engagement in the world. Among these, the aggregate of consciousness is generally considered the most impactful on human experience and is thus delivered first in the letter index. The eight collections of consciousness refer to the five sensory perceptions¹⁰⁴ (which will have their own place in the letter index), mental consciousness, deluded consciousness, and

¹⁰⁴ The terms “consciousness” and “perception” are both translations of the same Tibetan word, *rnam shes*. Often, translators will call the five sensory perceptions “visual consciousness” or “aural consciousness.” There is value in these translation conventions, as it both aligns with the Tibetan and Sanskrit terms and offers a specificity for traditional understandings of the kind of cognitive work at play in sensory perception and how that relates to other philosophical concepts of the mundane world. I have elected to use the more familiar English term “sensory perception” as it is more readily understandable to a broader audience in its depiction of the ways the senses and the sensed world come together. In addition, the nuances of Buddhist philosophical traditions that require literal (if awkward) translations appear to be less at play here than in other contexts, giving me the freedom to translate for better readability.

storehouse consciousness (though these final two are generally not imagined with elsewhere in the chapter).¹⁰⁵

Just as the letter ***Ṭha*** is heard arising from unceasing ***A***, so does the aggregate of consciousness echo from the unceasing all-ground, which is signified by ***A***. This draws a direct connection between the letter and the concept and locates these concepts of the mundane world within the larger system that finds a transcendent reality as its foundation.¹⁰⁶ Because the emergence of sound mirrors the emergence of these concepts, the *Secret Matrix* delivers its construction of the mundane world and the dynamism of reality through a sonic medium of inquiry. This medium both traces the boundaries of how the mundane world can be understood and grants it particular resonances that align with the process and imagination of making sounds.

In this way, the letter index explanations begin with detailed analyses for each of the three modes of the letter (sound, mundane concept, transcendent deity). With each successive discussion, though, the detail decreases, in a typical fashion of Tibetan commentarial writings that attempt to avoid over-repetition.¹⁰⁷ The letters ***Ṭa***, ***Ḍa***, ***Ḍha***, and ***Ṇa*** are all also produced via the same vocal mechanism – the connection of the unceasing letter ***A*** with conditions of the mouth. ***Ṭa*** appears as the mundane concept of the form aggregate, ***Ḍa*** as the sensation aggregate, ***Ḍha*** as the discrimination aggregate, and ***Ṇa*** as the aggregate of propensities for action. All these mundane concepts describing individual beings also arise from the all-ground, signified by ***A***.

¹⁰⁵ See the previous note on the all-ground and the storehouse consciousness.

¹⁰⁶ An imagination that will be further explored in chapter 2.

¹⁰⁷ This has multiple possible reasons behind it, from assumptions that an audience will know what the system of explanation is after a couple iterations, to an author shortcut around more work, to economical reasons around the conservation of ink, paper, and scribes' time.

1.1.2.2.2 The **Ta** Family

After the retroflex **Ta** family, the commentary turns to its dental counterpart, the **Ta** family. The concept of the mundane world associated with this family is the external elements of the material world: earth, water, fire, air, and space. The commentary begins with a brief overview of these five natural elements. It is especially concerned with their connection to the five psycho-physical aggregates that were mapped onto the retroflex **Ta** family above. It notes that “the five [psycho-physical] aggregates are inseparable from the five elements [of the material world,]”¹⁰⁸ condensing the axis poles of the mundane external world and beings internal to it.

The descriptions of the individual letters are again ordered on the basis of their corresponding concept’s philosophical significance, rather than their normal alphabetical order. Within the five elements, space has arguably been the site of most Buddhist philosophical intrigue on the elements due to its alluring connection to emptiness.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the *Secret Matrix* initiates this discussion with the letter **Tha**, which appears as the element of space.

*“Tha is the manifestly complete net itself.” In the context of letters, **Tha** appears via the condition of the tongue from the dynamism of unceasing **A**. “Net” means pervasive and cohering. [Although it is a] mere appearance itself, [**Tha**] is identified as pervasive and cohering, and [its] appearance is inseparable [from its] empty [nature]. As a [mundane] concept, **Tha** signifies the element of space which appears from the all-ground signified by **A**. All [material] phenomena [of the container world and its contents, beings] are subsumed within space and*

¹⁰⁸ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 364.3-4.

¹⁰⁹ See Devin Zuckerman’s forthcoming dissertation, *Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Space: A History of Matter in Tibet’s Great Perfection Seminal Heart Tradition*, for further detail on the elements in Tibetan Buddhism.

pervade throughout it. Because this is the nature of everything, it is [called] a net and [connects to] wisdom.

The Sun's Quintessence 364.6-365.3

The descriptions of the **Ta** family follow the same pattern as its retroflex counterpart. They begin with a discussion of the letter itself, the method of its sound production (which in this case is the combination of the tip of the tongue onto the back of the teeth), and the way it emerges from the unceasing letter **A**. Here, and in succeeding letter families, this description is less robust than in the **Ṭha** family, providing a basic reference to each letter's articulatory phonetics and origin in **A**.

As concepts, the **Ta** family signify the five material elements, beginning here with space. These elements too arise from the all-ground, signified by **A**, just like their corresponding letters. Space is given a cursory explanation, in which it is defined as containing all the phenomena of the mundane world, which in turn, pervade it. Just as the members of the retroflex **Ṭha** family were called “magical emanations,” the dental **Ta** family letters are called “nets” (*drwa ba*).¹¹⁰ Thus, both the letter **Tha** and the mundane concept of the space element are described according to this feature. The two qualities of a net given here are its pervasiveness and its ability to gather or cohere. Since **Tha** is described as pervasive and cohering in its appearance, and space both contains and is pervaded by phenomena, they are both “nets.” Finally, this is connected to wisdom (*shes rab*), the ideological partner of “method” discussed above. This pattern continues throughout the other letters of the **Ta** family. **Ta** is identified as earth, **Da** as water, **Dha** as fire, and **Na** as wind.

¹¹⁰ The combination of “magical emanation” and “net” is a reference to the name of the cycle to which the *Secret Matrix* is the foundational text – the *Māyājāla* cycle, or the Net of Magical Emanations cycle.

1.1.2.2.3 The **Ka** Family

The rest of the letter families follow a similar pattern, though are individually arranged according to their alphabetical order, and thus begin with **Ka**, **Ca**, and **Pa** respectively.¹¹¹

The **Ka** family relates to sensory perception, and thus begins with a statement clarifying perception and its relation to awakened mind, to which it will transcend.

Perception is awareness of the attributes of [sensory] objects through the gateways of the five sensory perceptions. These intimately relate to the mind that directly follows [those perceptions]. Therefore, [when the mundane] mind and the [sensory] perceptions are completely transformed, [one realizes] the fundamental purity of [mundane] mind – awakened mind. ...

*“**Kha** is the supreme awakened mind of aural [perception].” [The letter] **Kha** appears from the unceasing dynamism of **A** and via the conditions of the throat. Again, [while it appears,] it is unwavering from **A**. [As a concept, **Kha**] appears as aural perception that grasps onto sounds. [It arises] from the all-ground signified by **A**.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 369.3-370.4

The initial definition of perception relates the five sensory perceptions to their objects, another pairing between the internal experience of beings and the external material world like the aggregates and elements. It then connects them to the mind, which is held as the sixth perception or consciousness in Buddhism that processes the other five. As we will learn in the next chapter on transcendence, the **Ka**, **Cha**, and **Pa** families are related to the awakened mind, body, and speech respectively – correlations that follow their mundane counterparts. Because sensory perception is described in its close relation

¹¹¹ The passages I will use for each of these come from the second letter of each family: **Kha**, **Cha**, and **Pha**. I am using these as they focus on the sensory domain of sound, though the tantra does not privilege them in the ordering. There may be some connection between the tantra’s use of the aspirated un-voiced letter for both the primary concepts and deities of **Ṭha** and **Tha** and the aural sensory domain’s perception, object, and organ as **Kha**, **Cha** and **Pha**. However, if there is one, it remains speculative and the tantra does not flesh it out. Regardless, in a dissertation on sound, please forgive my inclination to include it wherever I hear it in the texts.

to mental consciousness, it is connected to the awakened mind.

The letters of the **Ka** family are described in similar terms to the previous letter families. Here, the articulation of the family’s phonetics is located in the throat, while **A** again supplies the inherent source. The specific correspondences to the five sense perceptions follow normative orders for both the alphabet and the senses within Sanskrit and Buddhism: **Ka** is visual perception, **Kha** is aural perception, **Ga** is olfactory perception, **Gha** is gustatory perception, and **Nga** is tactile perception. In the descriptions of each of these, as stated above, sensory perception is defined according to its sensory object. Thus, aural perception is identified as “grasping onto sounds (*sgrar ‘dzin*).”¹¹²

1.1.2.2.4 The **Ca** Family

The concepts of the **Ca** family are paired with those of the **Ka** family. These are the five sensory objects (*dbang po ‘i yul*) of visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touchable things. The commentary again begins with an introduction that intimately connects sensory objects with sensory perception.

As for [sensory] objects... The Vajra Illusion states that “through the four [sensory] perceptions, one is made to see and so forth the object of [their] focus...” Further... [sensory] perception arises in reliance on [sensory] objects...

*“**Cha** is the supreme awakened body of the ear.” [The letter] **Cha** appears via the conditions of the tongue and from the unceasing dynamism of the letter **A**. Although it appears, it does not waver from **A**. Its essential concept is the [sensory] object of the ear, sounds, which are signified by **Cha** and [arise] from the all-ground signified by **A**.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 372.2-373.2

¹¹² The term grasping (*‘dzin pa*) could also be translated here as apprehending, a more neutral term, and still make sense as a definition for sensory perception. I have decided to use the negatively valenced “grasping” instead to reflect the context of deluded straying underpinning the entire index of mundane concepts.

Other than the specifics of this section of the index, the form remains the same. The **Ca** family's phonetic articulation is via the flat of the tongue hitting the roof of the mouth. Its members are related to the five sensory objects and aligns with both the Sanskrit and Buddhist ordering systems. Thus, **Ca** is visual forms, **Cha** is sounds, **Ja** is smells, and **Jha** is tastes.

The nasal for both the Ca and Pa families are switched, however. Thus, **Nya** is the tactile sense organ – the body – while **Ma** is assigned touchable things. The reason for this is unclear, but I would speculate that the *Secret Matrix* is trying to disrupt expectations around the nasal correspondences. As we will find in the transcendent index, these are all male wrathful gatekeepers, paired to the erroneous philosophical views found in the sibilants instead of to their adjacent letter families.

The order of each letter and sensory object aligns with their preceptory counterparts, a choice that contains lingering implications from this linguistic medium and has consequences for other ways the index will be constructed. All these letters and sensory objects arise from **A** and the all-ground. Finally, as external forms, the *Secret Matrix* connects the sensory objects with the awakened body, which is described as a “form on which one should focus.”¹¹³

1.1.2.2.4 The **Pa** Family

The final full consonant family, the **Pa** family, completes this sensory trio. While the **Ka** and **Ca** families are related to the five sensory perceptions and five sensory objects respectively, the **Pa** family represents the sense organs (*dbang po*), explained here as a

¹¹³ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 372.3.

communicating factor between perception and its object.

The sense organs are explained as awakened speech [for three reasons]: There is communication in the meeting of sensory perception and sensory object. This communication occurs in reliance on the sense organs, which serve to illuminate things. And because all verbal expressions [also] communicate, [the sense organs] are related to awakened speech.

*“**Pha** is the supreme awakened speech of the ear.” [The letter] **Pha** appears via the lips and from the unceasing dynamism of **A**. Although it appears, it is unwavering from **A**. When it is a concept, [**Pha**] appears as the ear sense organ [in the form of] a twisted ear of grain. [It arises] from the unceasing dynamism of the all-ground.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 374.5-375.6

The defining description for the sense organs is heavily influenced by the trio of transcendent attributes that the *Secret Matrix* wishes to include. While sense perceptions are closely related to mental consciousness in Buddhist philosophical systems, and the visual forms of awakened embodied beings are discussed and depicted at length, the connection between the sense organs and the awakened speech is less obvious. Here, the commentary flexes its creativity within these constraints to envision the sense organs as communicative between perception and object. Just as humans and Buddhas communicate through verbal means, so too do sense organs mediate the relationship between the previously paired sensory perceptions and objects.

The rest of the section is straightforward. The **Pa** family’s articulation occurs via the lips. The orders remain the same, matching the placement of their other sensory counterparts in the **Ka** and **Ca** families. Thus, **Pa** is eye, **Pha** is ear, **Ba** is nose, and **Bha** is tongue. The concept for **Ma** is again switched with **Nya**, whereby **Ma** is touchable objects instead of the tactile organ – the body.

The final additions to the description of the sense organs are their shapes. In classical

Buddhist philosophy of the senses, each sense organ has a special, though imperceptible, shape. A close analogy for modern Western medicine might be the rods and cones of the eye. We have identified the shapes of basic functioning parts of the visual sense organ based on our scientific understandings of them. Likewise, the shape that functions as the sense organ within the eye is a sesame seed. Within the ear there is the shape of a twisted ear of grain, and so forth. These shapes are not taken up further by the *Secret Matrix*, however they further connect the text with a pedigree of Buddhist philosophy that would be recognizable by an educated audience.

1.1.2.2.5 The Semivowels

The mundane index for the semi-vowels, *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La*, travel to different territory: time. This represents a breakdown in the tidy pairing system of the index up till now. The five psycho-physical aggregates of beings were paired with the external five elements, and the five sensory perceptions were paired with their corresponding sensory objects. However, sense organs, acting as internal intermediaries in the sensory process, seem to lack a distinct external partner. And what to do about a four-fold system of time?

Where the logics of the alphabet and mundane concepts fail, the *Secret Matrix* pushes through at the transcendent level with consort pairs, connecting the four peaceful outer bodhisattvas of the *Pa* family (not including the wrathful nasal gatekeeper, *Ma*) with the four offering goddesses of the semi-vowels. Here, we begin to find a possible alphabetical logic to the strange case of the wrathful nasals. After the letter families, the rest of the Sanskrit alphabet uses different numbering systems. In order to integrate the group of four semi-vowels and four times, the tantra might have needed to be creative within those constraints. Regardless, the commentary takes care to connect the mundane

concepts of time, indicated by the semi-vowels, to the sense organs, to which they are uneasily paired.

“Ya is Totally Pure Generation” and so forth concerns the four stages of destruction, becoming, emptiness and abiding, [as well as] the four seasons, the four moments. These are the [external] objects paired with the sense organs. By relying on the sense organs, one clearly knows the details of the body (or time). Thus, these are consort pairs with the sensory organs.

[The letter] Ya comes about via the [flat of the tongue] hitting to the roof [of the mouth] and from the unceasing dynamism of A. [Although it appears,] it is unwavering from A. The concept [of Ya] is called “generation.” Thus, it appears as time in three aspects: becoming, spring, and the past. [It arises] from the dynamism of the unceasing all-ground, and although it appears, it is unwavering from the all-ground.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 377.4-378.2

The connection drawn between the sense organs and time is intriguing, if less than clear. The commentary seems to claim that the sense organs give one purchase on the body, which is somehow integrated with the concepts of time. It is possible that this is a reference to how time is felt in an embodied way. The body ages throughout the past, present, and future, the heat and cold of the seasons is felt with the body, and so forth. A more likely explanation though, would be a scribal error. Time (*dus*) is very close in Tibetan typography to the body (*lus*). Since we do not have other witnesses to this text, it is currently not possible to verify this, but it would be a simple error and make more sense. That being said, the reason that one might know the details of time via the sense organs is still unclear. Perhaps for the same reasons above, the sense organs witness the passing of time in a unique way. However, this is not clarified further in the commentary.

The phonetics of the semi-vowels, *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La*, are described as being

articulated via the tongue reaching the roof of the mouth.¹¹⁴ As mundane concepts, each letter is indexed according to three types of time: cosmological, seasonal, and momentary, each of which have four stages. The four classical Buddhist cosmological times are the creation of the universe (becoming), the abiding of the universe, its eventual destruction, and the period of emptiness that follows. The four seasons are spring, summer, autumn and winter. And the four moments point to the past, present, and future moments of time, as well as future generations.

While each letter is indexed according to all three types of time, the cosmological time is the only one represented in the root tantra's description, where it reads, "**Ya** is totally pure generation, **Wa** is pure abiding, **Ra** is pure destruction, and **La** is pure emptiness." Within this schema, the letters progress in chronological order. **Ya** is the initial time within each quartet: becoming, spring, and the past. **Wa** is the second: abiding, summer, and present. **Ra** follows with destruction, autumn and the future. **La** concludes with emptiness, winter, and future generations.

It is interesting to note that all these times are cyclical. The four seasons are naturally a repeating cycle. In classical Buddhist cosmogony and eschatology, the world is formed, abides, is destroyed, and there is a period of emptiness, out of which the world is created again. And even past, present, and future are fluid categories, in which what was once the future becomes the present which in turn falls to the past. This fact is not theorized further in the tantra, though it leads to a reflection on the fluidity within all the mundane

¹¹⁴ If you try this yourself, you might notice that "**Wa**" in particular does not quite fit this description. Again, this seems to indicate that the articulatory phonetics are primarily used to connect the letter index to Sanskrit categories of articulation and sonic maps of the body as discussed previously, rather than as a truly descriptive model.

concepts and certain insight into the ways the *Secret Matrix* considers and constructs the mundane world.

1.1.2.2.6 The Sibilants and the Aspirate

The sibilants, **Śa**, **Ṣa**, and **Sa**, and the aspirate **Ha**, are grouped together to make another set of four letters corresponding to four erroneous philosophical views that Buddhism traditionally warns against: eternalism, nihilism, the self, and holding onto signifiers of a substantial reality.

“Śa is purified eternalism.” [The letter] Śa appears as the tongue [hits] the roof [of the mouth] and from the unceasing dynamism of A. It does not waver from A. As a concept, Śa appears as the [erroneous philosophical] views of materialism and eternalism. [It appears] from the unceasing dynamism of the all-ground, however does not waver from the all-ground.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 379.6

The same phonetic description appears at the beginning of each of these letters, as does their connection with the all-ground and **A**. The erroneous views actually number more than four, with the commentary adding in similar views to the original four. Thus, **Śa** is correlated with eternalism and materialism, with **Ṣa** nihilism and immaterialism, **Sa** with self and all extreme views (including eternalism and nihilism), and **Ha** with views that “grasp onto any material reality having signifiers such as good and bad, big and small and so forth.”¹¹⁵ Here, the pairing of internal and external again is strained. According to the logic of the *Secret Matrix*’s transcendent pantheon, these four are paired with the four wrathful gatekeepers related to the body.¹¹⁶ The commentary notes that these wrathful gatekeepers of the body “abide in the externality of all phenomena,” while the female

¹¹⁵ *The Sun’s Quintessence, 381.6*

¹¹⁶ These are the three already discussed for sensory perception, object, and organ, as well as one more to follow.

gatekeepers associated with these erroneous views represent “inferior [aspects] of the internal.”¹¹⁷ Thus, the body and the sensory domain of touch grounds the internal confusion of the erroneous views, forming the final pairs of mundane concepts.

1.1.2.2.7 The Vowels

The last letter category is the vowels. Six of the eight (or more) vowels are given in this section, corresponding to the six afflictive emotions and the beings of the six realms afflicted by them.

“I is gods as numerous as dust”. [The letter] I appears via [vocal] conditions and from the dynamism of the unceasing A. It is unwavering from A. As a concept, [I] appears as the worldly gods who are signified by I. [They appear] from the dynamism of the unceasing all-ground. Although they appear, they are inseparable from the all-ground... [They are as] “numerous as dust.” There are no limits to the realms of the world, nor to the [number] of beings of the six types including gods and so forth who persist endlessly in the ten directions. [The number of] gods are incalculable and unimaginable – “as numerous as dust.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 386.1-4

The same form is followed here, where the phonetics of the letters are given first.

However, since the normative Sanskrit models of articulation placement are less useful for vowels, the commentary simply states that it appears via unstated “conditions.” Each letter is connected with a duo of matching concepts from traditional Buddhist cosmology – the six realms of beings and their primary emotional afflictions. In this way *I* is the signifier for the god realm and their pride, *Ī* for the titans and jealousy, *U* for humans and greed, *Ū* for animals and ignorance, *E* for tormented spirits and desire, and *Ai* for hell-beings and anger.

¹¹⁷ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 379.6-380.2.

Unlike the rest of the letters of the index, these are not paired with other letters or concepts. This is perhaps due to the existence of a pair of concepts already contained within them – realms and afflictions. However, it could also be a remnant of the alphabet and its constraints as there are no other letters with which to pair.

Regardless, the choices the *Secret Matrix* has made throughout the letter index, the ways it has organized the letter families, the types of mundane concepts it chose, its model of pairing internal and external concepts and so forth, are demonstrative. They provide insight into the ways the *Secret Matrix* constructs their view of the mundane world and how it arises from a dynamic reality, the ways language occludes reality (though may be used to transcend that confusion), and the constraints and affordances of their sonic linguistic medium through which they consider the mundane world.

1.2 The *Unimpeded Sound*

The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra presents an entirely different model for the way sound functions, creates, distorts, and disintegrates the mundane world. It uses many of the same traditional Buddhist building blocks of the mundane world: the five psycho-physical aggregates, the five material elements, the six sensory domains, the five emotional afflictions, the six realms of living beings, the alphabet, and the physical, verbal, and mental capacities of beings. It also contends with some of the same underlying tensions such as between sound as obscuring and sound as revealing. However, the ways it imagines these through the mode of its sonic inquiry is remarkably different. It eschews the order and hierarchy of the *Secret Matrix* in its reliance on the alphabet as a guiding organizational principle for the arising of mundane phenomena. Instead, it speaks of a world where the sounds of powerful forces such as gods, mythical beings, and the natural environment usher in delusion through faulty language and enumeration, improper aesthetic orientation, and fundamental misunderstandings of the sounds of the material world around us. In such a world, our sensory understanding is deluded, preventing us from truly hearing the Buddha's message, leaving us with this mundane existence.

These sources of sound, misheard, have divided and obscured reality, leading beings to stray into a mundane world. However, even these apparently delusional sounds have become awakened. We will listen to the narrative tales of their sonic transcendence in the next chapter. But, for now, it is important for the mundane imagination of the *Unimpeded Sound* that the sources of sounds which have led to delusion, now resound with awakened tones. Brahmā, Viṣṇu and the kalapingka bird – two gods of other religions and a singer of intoxicating birdsong – serve as crypto-Buddhas, whose sonic influences have been

fundamentally transformed by the *Unimpeded Sound*. Likewise, the sounds of our material world seem to bolster the solidity and certainty of the mundane. Yet, they will be revealed as frequencies of an underlying sonic reality. Even the voice of our teachers can be heard as mere words, though their sounds have the capacity to blow open the limits of our preceptory understanding. Misunderstood, their doctrines, classifications, songs, rumblings, and ramblings lead to delusion. Heard properly, their language, enumerations, melodies, natural sonority, and awakened speech dissolve that very calcification of the mundane world.

Attunement to such awakened sounds, as they continue to reside in and inform our deluded experience of the mundane, will prove to be a core philosophy for the *Unimpeded Sound*. It charts a path from the mundane to the transcendent via these apparently deluded locations, through contemplations of listening to our environments, reciting arcane syllables, and playing with the materials of our sensory world and bodies. This tension between sounds as limiting factors on our experience, creating the delusion of the mundane world, and sounds as awakening forces, enacting freedom from it – a tension resonant with the *Secret Matrix* – will be central to the *Unimpeded Sound's* inquiry.

We will also attend to the ways the *Unimpeded Sound* constructs and connects its mundane world through sound. The *Secret Matrix* attempted clear divides and pairings between the external mundane environment and the living beings within, structuring it all based on alphabetical models. How will the mundane world play out for the *Unimpeded Sound* in its structure of five sites where sound has descended into the world and shaped our experience of this mundane existence? We will trace over the sounds, patterns,

correspondences, and logics to reveal their mundane imagination. We will find that our psycho-physical aggregates and emotional afflictions crystalize and exhaust together through language. Our obsession with numbering the world results in orders and distinctions in our alphabets, our senses, our realms, and our minds. Forgotten melodies and sonorous qualities pervade our physical bodies, verbal expressions, and mental attentions – though we continue to sing off-key. The material elements and their sounds intimately connect external environments to the physical makeups of beings. And the words of Buddhist teachers contain more than we currently hear and can open our sensory understandings of the world.

Fundamentally, we will find a world in which the elements reign supreme. The other descents of sound will position themselves against the elements' external sounds. Their internal presence and transformations in the bodies of beings will be a methodology of individualization for one's contemplative approach. The training on them will be shown as essential to awakening, such that all Buddhas of the three times will have listened to the sounds of the elements.

The Unimpeded Sound places this discussion under the heading of “*Sound*” in its self-reflection on the name of the tantra. Its presentation is divided into five sections, imagined as five locations where the sound of these forces has descended into the world. These locations are grouped and succinctly named according to the sonic source – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, the elements, and the teacher's voice. Most are divided into sections that correspond to the sites of the mundane world affected or created by their sounds, which become targets of contemplative training. The linguistic sounds of Brahmā echo in the five psycho-physical aggregates that connect with the five emotional

afflictions. The numerological sounds of Viṣṇu coalesce into ways we number the world: the two vocalic and consonant parts of the alphabet, the five senses, the six realms of beings, and three divisions of mind. And the melodies of the kalapingka bird resonate within the body, speech, and mind of living beings.

The presentations on the other two descent sites are somewhat distinct from these. The organization and contemplations on the sounds of the elements are elaborated later in this text, in the *Listening to the Elements* practice – the core contemplative practice of the *Unimpeded Sound*.¹¹⁸ In this section on the *Five Descents of Sound*, which functions more to create the text's sonic imagination, the discussion on the elements is more explanatory. It delivers an ideology of the elements that addresses the connection between the external material world and the internal makeup of living beings. It also presents a system of gendered modes and interrelations between the elements such that a rich symphony of elemental sound emerges. Finally, the section on the teacher's voice discusses how verbal explanations given by a teacher who has realized elemental sound can open one's understanding. The primary mundane imagination that is explored in this section is sensory receptivity and capacity for knowledge. It interrogates the senses, finding three-hundred and sixty sensory sites where the teacher's instructions can land, and where the sounds of their voice can move beings beyond the mere words of the teaching.

1.2.1 *Brahmā*

The first descent of sound is the Hindu god, Brahmā, famed for his qualities of speech.

¹¹⁸ This will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

The sites of his linguistic sounds' descent are the five psycho-physical aggregates of beings, which trigger their emotional afflictions. In this way, we find the sonic imagination for the mundane world investigated by the rubric of Brahmā's five sites of sonic descent contend with the reification of beings and their afflictive experience in the world. However, as mentioned previously, Brahmā was transformed by the sound of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, becoming a force for awakening instead of straying. These sites of aggregation and affliction, too, will thus become locations of contemplative training.

As we saw in the *Secret Matrix*, the five psycho-physical aggregates of form, sensation, discernment, propensity for action, and consciousness, are a primary way that beings in the mundane world are considered according to traditional Buddhist philosophy. The *Unimpeded Sound's* mundane imagination does not offer the hierarchy of the *Secret Matrix*, where the five aggregates were first and foremost among the concepts of the mundane world. Yet, it is notable that these five aggregates are also a primary site of inquiry for the *Unimpeded Sound* and are discussed first in its treatment of the mundane world.

Brahmā's sound is said to reside within this makeup of beings. By attuning to those sonic locations contemplatively, one is able to attend to two interrelated problems of mundane existence. First, through training on Brahmā's sound in the five aggregates, "grasping to the aggregates"¹¹⁹ as real is purified, whereby "the differentiation of the five psycho-physical aggregates cease."¹²⁰ We find that even though they are sites of the now

¹¹⁹ The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 119.5.

¹²⁰ The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 119.2.

transcendent sound of Brahmā, the five aggregates are still fixated on by delusional beings who reify and compartmentalize themselves through the processes inherent to the functioning of each aggregate. Beings grasp onto these as real, keeping them within the mundane world.

Through attending to each of these aggregates in their capacity as sites of Brahmā's sound, another delusional system of mundane is addressed: the afflictive emotions. As a result of the training on each of the five sonic locations in aggregates, the five afflictive emotions of ignorance, pride, desire, jealousy, and anger that plague living beings are exhausted.

The locations of [Brahmā's] sound are as such: via [training on] the location of [his sound in the aggregate of] form, [the afflictive emotion of] ignorance is exhausted; via the location of [his sound in] sensation, pride is exhausted; via the location of discernment, desire is exhausted; via the location of propensities for action, jealousy is exhausted; and via the location of consciousness, anger is exhausted.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 111.3-5

The commentary introduces a final mundane five-fold system of knowledge in the consideration of Brahmā's sound in the five aggregates: the natural elements of the material world. These elements proliferate in the *Unimpeded Sound*, both in their external forms in the environment, and as major constituents to the physical and psychological makeup of beings. In this second sense, elemental body constitutions are often used as a physiological metric of individuation. Contemplative practitioners will be identified by their major elemental body type, either as a condition of their birth year or as their body changes through time.¹²¹ These constitutions are limited to the four elements of water,

¹²¹ The text seems to go back and forth between these models, discussing elemental body types in both ways. While the commentary is very clear that one's elemental body type is dependent on one's birth

earth, fire, and wind (for reason that will be discussed below). They are further subdivided into three or four modalities: centralized (*zug*), diffused (*byer*), balanced (*snyoms*), and sometimes disrupted (*'khrug*). The first three of these modalities are normal ebbs and flows of a given element's predominance within one's constitution. When an element is centralized, it intensely gathers within one's body. By contrast, in a diffused elemental constitution, that particular element is weaker but pervasive. A balanced elemental body is in between these poles. A disrupted body, on the other hand, is when the element in question is not functioning properly, leading to disease and other misfortune.

Thus, the section on Brahmā's sound interweaves three distinct rubrics for the mundane world: the five aggregates, the five afflictions, and the five elements. These are all correlated in reminiscent ways to the letter index of the *Secret Matrix*, though using different systems of logic, constructions of the mundane world, and ways these mundane rubrics interact with sound. As we will witness in the following sections, training on Brahmā's sound in the aggregate of form should be performed by someone with a water constitution in order to exhaust the affliction of ignorance. This pattern repeats for the other for aggregates, such that training on Brahmā's sound in sensation aligns with the earth element and the affliction of pride; the aggregate of discernment corresponds to fire and desire; propensity for action to wind and jealousy, and consciousness to space and the exhaustion of anger. Attending to these junctures throughout this section will provide insight into the novel ways the *Unimpeded Sound* constructs and connects the layers of its

year, the way it is often used, including in this section, implies fluctuation in which element predominates one's constitution and in what modality.

mundane world.

At the end of these five explanations, we are still left wondering what the actual sounds of Brahmā are. We are told that Brahmā has one-thousand sounds – two hundred within each of these locations. One trains on all these sounds, presumably through the methods outlined in each location. But what are they?

Our clue to the actual sounds of Brahmā comes in a concluding reflection, where the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are multiplied by four, thus arriving at two-hundred sounds for each location.¹²² The text states that “in each of five locations of Brahmā’s sound, the fifty letters multiplied by four [act to] guide, express, and engage,” and that these two-hundred extrinsic activities of letters “are the emanations of Great Brahmā’s words.”¹²³ This passage thus seems to indicate that Brahmā’s transcendent sounds are linguistic in nature, and that it is the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet that reside within the five aggregates of beings. Language appears to be generatively responsible for the delusion of our mundane sense of self and the way we engage with the world, often through processes of emotional turmoil.

Unfortunately, the text never clearly states this process, and it takes a certain amount of interpretation to reach this conclusion. The sounds of the alphabet are not the primary imagination or contemplative foci as they were in the *Secret Matrix*. Instead, emphasis is placed on the psycho-physical aggregates and afflictive emotions themselves – what they

¹²² The text presents complicated reasoning here including repeating backwards and forwards and adding special characters, such as the Sanskrit vocalic *Ṛ* and *Ḍ* or the Tibetan ‘*a chung*, to letters in order to multiply the fifty-letter version of the Sanskrit alphabet by four, reaching the requisite two-hundred sounds in each of Brahmā’s locations. However, it remains unclear exactly how the author is completing his calculations, what letters are included in the final tally, and whether this is a process of recitation backwards and forwards, or rather a vocalic change that applies to all letters in four ways.

¹²³ The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 119.6.

are and how they can be addressed – correlating them under the rubric of Brahmā’s sound. The fact that this sound is shown to be the foundation of language is only revealed after these discussions and contemplations, and even there, it is mostly buried within esoteric and ancillary recitation practices of the alphabet. Reflecting on the *Five Descents of Sound* holistically though, a pattern begins to emerge. The reification of the aggregates and elements through language aligns with the enumerated catalogues of beings generated by Viṣṇu’s numerical sounds. Both letters and numbers are described as the ways the locations of their respective sounds are extrinsic (*gzhan*)¹²⁴ to them and how their misuse creates separation and otherness in our experience, forming the mundane world.

1.2.1.1 Sound in Form

Physical form is the first psycho-physical aggregate discussed as a location of Brahmā’s sound in the mundane world. Training on this location by a person with an elemental constitution of water leads to the exhaustion of ignorance. The section is organized as a contemplative practice, with its sonic imagination threading throughout. The commentary

¹²⁴ This itself is a challenging and central translation problem for the *Five Descents of Sound*. The term used in the Tibetan for each of these descents is the “extrinsic locations of sound” (*sgra’i gnas gzhan*) coming from each source. The locations of sound (*sgra’i gnas*) are described according to the main topics of each section such as the five aggregates for Brahmā. However, “extrinsic” is less clear. The Tibetan term *gzhan* typically means “other,” defined in the *bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* dictionary as “everything external that is not oneself.” In this text, the term is glossed with the letters of the alphabet and numbers for Brahmā and Viṣṇu respectively, though even this gloss is somewhat hidden within prescriptions for contemplative practice. My understanding of this usage is that these sounds have become *othered* or *externalized*. This can be thought of in two ways. First is from the perspective of the transcendent deities whose sounds are in question. We are not investigating these sounds at their source – the deities themselves. Our inquiry is how they have become emmeshed in the fabric of our mundane world. Thus, these sounds have become *externalized* from their source. The second way to approach this takes into consideration the othering process that is integral to the subject-object grasping at the core of the mundane world. These sounds of letters and numbers create a fantasy world that is *other* than reality, and *others* us from our very nature. Both explanations can be mutually informing, following traditional Buddhist proclivities to narrativize contemplative and philosophical insights.

initially provides a definition of the aggregate of physical form – that which is limited by atoms.¹²⁵

The presence of ignorance in the practice is signaled through the contemplative experiences of confusion and unknown desires to laugh, cry or shout. And while the purported goal of training on this location is to dissolve the grasping of the aggregate of physical form and the affliction of ignorance, one also experiences the sound of their elemental body. Thus, the text reads, “through doing this [recitation] for six months, you occasionally hear the sound of water.”¹²⁶ This will be a theme that reoccurs throughout the other discussions of Brahmā’s sound in the five aggregates. We find that the sound of the elements is a central concern for the *Unimpeded Sound* and will find ways to pervade nearly all discussions around its sonic imagination.

1.2.1.2 Sound in Sensation

The second location of Brahmā’s sound, the psycho-physical aggregate of sensation, corresponds to the elemental constitution of earth and exhausts the affliction of pride.

This section elaborates the idea of elemental constitution, laying out the three modalities in which an element operates in one’s body – centralized, diffused, and balanced.

The yogi with an earth body should train on the exhaustion of pride by means of the location of [Brahmā’s sound in the aggregate of] sensation. To expand on that, the [three] parameter of sensation are painful, pleasant, and neutral [sensations]. Furthermore, the person in whom the earth element is centralized should uninterruptedly recite...

¹²⁵ We will find that the main recitation practice for this aggregate is even chanting the word ‘atom’ (*rdu*). While this has an obvious correlation to the mundane imagination delivered by the commentary, the other recitation practices of this section do not share such imagination building qualities and are typically nonsensical sounds (an interesting decision in its own right). These will be discussed in Chapter 3 on Contemplative Design and Experience.

¹²⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 112.6.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 113.4-5

In this passage, the aggregate of sensation is described by its classical Buddhist definition in which there are only three types, or parameters (*mtha*'), of sensation: painful, pleasant, or neutral sensations. This typology is the limiting horizon against which all sensation is considered.

To attend to the sound of Brahmā in this psycho-physical aggregate of sensation, practitioners again recite a single sound repeatedly. While the previous sound was also a word connected with the aggregate ('atoms' as the smallest part of physical form), these sounds do not appear to be related, or semantically meaningful at all. However, the sounds are customized to fit different body types. Thus, a practitioner whose earth body is centralized, diffused, or balanced will recite different syllables. While a variety of experiences and results follow these different paths, such as blissful and painful feelings associated with the boundaries of sensation, all practitioners hear the sound of earth at the end.¹²⁷

1.2.1.3 Sound in Discernment

The third location of Brahmā's sound in beings is within the aggregate of discernment.

This aggregate is connected with the elemental constitution of fire and exhaust the affliction of desire.

Training on the location [of Brahmā's sound] in [the aggregate of] discernment (lit. gathered cognition) exhausts desire. To expand on that, the parameters of 'gathering' are that it encircles things that are not in one place. The parameter of cognition is change. [This training is for] a yogi in whom fire is centralized, [dispersed, or balanced].

¹²⁷ These experiences will be discussed in greater detail in the third chapter of this dissertation. However, I am including these references as they also function to support the creation of these mundane sonic imaginations for the locations of Brahmā's sound.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 115.6-116.1.

The commentary explains the psycho-physical aggregate of discernment (*'du shes*), or its literal translation “gathered cognition,” as an act of creating boundaries around non-unified collections with one’s adaptable cognition. This definition implicates our mundane deluded ability to see wholes where there are only pieces, much like the difference between the idea of a whole self versus the component parts of the five aggregates that comprise it. And while the aggregate view is superior to the erroneous view of the self, it is still presented as a misguided one – a problem of grasping in the mundane world that can be eased through attention to the transcendent sound residing within the five aggregates themselves.

Engaging with this location of sound also exhausts the affliction of desire for one with an elemental constitution of fire. Again, this is enacted through the recitation of three distinct sounds by those with fire bodies that are either centralized, diffused, or balanced respectively. These recitations lead to aural experiences of Brahmā’s (gathered) retinue and the sound of fire.

1.2.1.4 Sound in Propensities for Action

The fourth location of Brahmā’s sound in beings is the aggregate that is a collection of our propensities for action. The commentary corresponds training on this location of sound with the exhaustion of jealousy and with elemental constitution of wind.

[The training on] the location [of Brahmā’s sound in the aggregate of] propensities for action (lit. gathered activity) exhausts jealousy. To expand on this, gathering means the accumulation [of past actions], from which [future karmic] activities emanate. Thus, a person in whom wind is centralized, [dispersed, or balanced] should [train on this location.]

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 117.4-5

Propensity for action (*'du byed*) is defined via the parameters of its individual

syllables. The accumulations of habitual patterns and virtue or non-virtue from previous actions are gathered – this is one’s *karma*. The ways one acts now and in the future are based on these previously set propensities and are thus said to emanate from them.

The sonic approaches to this location are again threefold, individualized for those with centralized, diffused, or balanced wind constitutions. Like the other practices, this culminates with an experience of the sound of wind.

1.2.1.3 Sound in Consciousness

Finally, the fifth location of Brahmā’s sound in beings is within the psycho-physical aggregate of consciousness. This is paired with the exhaustion of anger and with the element of space.

Training on the location of [Brahmā’s sound in the aggregate of] consciousness exhausts anger. Here, space is neuter and empty, and therefore it is a method for training that is common to all four [elemental] body [types].

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 118.3-4

The commentary notes the problem of the space element here, an issue that it further investigates in their inquiry of elemental sound below. Space does not correlate to a bodily constitution.¹²⁸ Thus, the text describes this location of sound as common to all four of the elemental body types. Each elemental constitution performs a slightly different practice that features separate recited sounds.

In these ways, the sound of Brahmā, his speech in the form of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, descend into the fabric of beings. It is held implicitly responsible for the deluded ways we name and reify the many processes of our individualized mundane

¹²⁸ This is explained later in the text as relating to gendered ideas of the elements, which allow for bodily constitutions and relevant practice on it. Space is described as neuter in this text, and thus not suitable for an elemental constitution or practice on its own.

existence and its emotional hardships. However, Brahmā's alphabetical sounds also contain the seeds of awakening, if we can attune to such transcendent sounds that reside within these linguistically formed categories.

This gives us insight into the role of sound in these mundane aspects of ourselves. The alphabetical sounds of Brahmā seem to have shaped our psycho-physical aggregates and emotions, leading us to stray into mundane worlds. In this, we find common ground with the *Secret Matrix's* philosophical reflections on the limits of language. But also like the vibrational revelations of the *Secret Matrix*, by training on the alphabetical sounds of Brahmā's now transcendent voice within our aggregates, beings can free themselves of their mundane limitations of aggregates and afflictions. The expression of sound is shown to have the capacity to both conjure mundane beings and dismantle them.

Finally, this all plays out in a broader elemental context, where the physical constitutions of beings change the resonances of their aggregates and afflictions. The sonic imaginations outlined here cement the importance of the elements in understanding our relationship to sonic contemplation, and herald experiences of elemental sound that will become central to the contemplative practice of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra.

1.2.2 Viṣṇu

Viṣṇu is the second mundane Hindu god who has been converted and made transcendent by the expression of *Unimpeded Sound*. His sounds are numbers located within four sets of enumerations that total sixteen aspects of the mundane world. While the root verses esoterically list “two, five, six, and three,”¹²⁹ the commentary fleshes out the enumerated

¹²⁹ The *Unimpeded Sound*, 19.

groups to which these numbers refer. The primary sites of enumeration for the text are thus the two syllables of Viṣṇu’s name; the five senses; the six realms of beings; and three mental states. In this way, the text presents Viṣṇu’s sounds as contributing to the deluded ways beings and their activities are categorized into language, sensory perception, embodiments, and mental states.

The commentary introduces these mundane locations in the broader context of how Viṣṇu pervades and engages across the natural elements and the trio of beings’ body, speech, and mind. The commentary commits to the imagination of Viṣṇu’s sound informing classifications of beings. However, it also listens to material elemental environments and tethers the internal experience and confused makeup of beings to the external world in their construction of the mundane.

Again, the commentary waits until the conclusion to reveal the actual sounds of Viṣṇu as numbers.¹³⁰ And again, this is somewhat hidden within an ancillary contemplative practice. In explaining the way that Viṣṇu’s sounds have externalized onto the mundane world, the commentary prescribes a 116-day practice in which one recites a series of numbers starting with single digits and escalating to millions, billions, and even “countless...unspeakable”¹³¹ numbers. This is to address the one-hundred sounds of

¹³⁰ It is interesting that Viṣṇu is given as the speaker of numbers. There are Hindu philosophical schools that are famous for their enumerations, such as the Sāṃkhya school, whose name literally means calculators and which is translated in Tibetan as “numerologists” (*grangs chan ma*). However, this is not a Vaiṣṇava school – in fact they are often considered their philosophical rivals. However, the *Unimpeded Sound* seems to find little interest in the kinds of logical philosophical argumentation and rivalries found in Indian philosophy, and in which other Tibetan schools revel. Instead, I believe their use of Viṣṇu here is as a recognizable non-Buddhist figure from a larger philosophical milieu in which the enumerations of the world are privileged. This would be enough to satisfy their establishment of crypto-Buddhas, exemplifying both the ways the mundane world has appeared through erroneous doctrines or misunderstandings, and the ways this can be disrupted through new attunement to the transcendence of their sounds as they persist in our mundane experience.

¹³¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 130.6-131.2.

Viṣṇu advertised in the root verses within each of the sixteen categories of enumeration they generate.

The math here is a bit fuzzy – instead of reciting one-hundred times for sixteen days or even sixteen-hundred days, for instance, one recites the numbers one through ten for ten days each totaling one-hundred days. Sixteen is then represented by an additional sixteen days of recitation with increasingly higher number values. However, at the end of this, one gains “a clear indication Viṣṇu’s scope of activity,” implying that by intimately and experientially knowing the sounds of numbers, one perceives how his enumerations are unfolding into the categorizations of the mundane world presented in this section.

Finally, the commentary quotes the *Sutra of the Great Host of Buddhas*¹³² to inform their reader that knowing “the limits of numbers deliver one to the inexpressibility of all phenomena.”¹³³ While numbers have initially led to expressions that catalogue and demarcate the mundane world, understanding their boundaries and failings can awaken new perception of that world. Thus, the *Unimpeded Sound* invites its audience to attend to the ways we enumerate our mundane world, with the promise that freedom from such limits is held within the sounds of numbers themselves.

1.2.2.1 The Sound of Two: Viṣṇu’s Name

There are two syllables in Viṣṇu’s name, both in Sanskrit and Tibetan. However, it is the Tibetan translation of his name as “pervasively engaging” (*khyab ‘jug*) that the *Unimpeded Sound* imagines with. This duo serves as both an etymology of his name and a broader introduction to ideological categories important in this sonic imagination. In

¹³² Tib. *sangs rgyas phal po che’i mdo*

¹³³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 131.4.

this passage, we find that the material world as well as the body, speech, and mind of beings are pervaded by Viṣṇu's numerical sounds, which are engaged across the constantly transforming elemental seasons.

“Pervasion” is five-fold. 1) [Viṣṇu’s numerical sounds] pervade the elements, [and thus] appearances are linked to reality in dependence upon [the numerical] indication of the elements’ [sonic] signatures. 2) [Viṣṇu’s numerical sounds] pervade the body, [and thus] the body is taught to be free from sickness and suffering. 3) [Viṣṇu’s] sounds pervade expression, and thus the inexpressible nature of all sounds and words is recited. 4) [Viṣṇu’s sounds] pervade speech, [and thus] one becomes learned in the experiential precepts [which detail] the combinations of words and meanings via the [alphabetical] garlands of vowels and consonants. 5) [Viṣṇu’s sounds] pervade the mind, [and thus] one hundred thousand contemplations are born in one meditation session.

“Engagement” is four-fold. 1) Engaging the three phases [– centralized, diffused, and balanced –] of water gathers all phenomena of mundane existence and transcendence. 2) Engaging the three phases of earth stabilizes the mind and the mind’s appearances. 3) Engaging the three phases of fire ripens external appearances [in the environment] and internal appearances [of the body]. 4) Engaging the three phases of wind differentiates and impels physical and mental activities.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp 122.2-123.1

Viṣṇu's enumerating sounds are thus considered to pervade the elements of the material world,¹³⁴ the physiology of beings, their verbal expressions, their speech (seen more in terms of the alphabetical foundations of language), and their minds. While they pervade these systems of the mundane world,¹³⁵ Viṣṇu's sounds are also forces for the transformation of that world. These sounds link elementally derived appearances to reality. They promote the flourishing of the physical body. They give voice to the inexpressible nature of sound. They instill deep knowledge of Buddhist teachings. And

¹³⁴ This seems to be a reference to the complex enumerations discussed in the elemental sound section of later in the *Five Descents*.

¹³⁵ The language used here indicates this, such as using the ordinary word for speech, *ngag*, instead of the honorific, *gsung*, typically reserved in this text for awakened speech.

they support a vast array of meditative experiences.

Further, his sounds engage the world and its beings through the four elements in their three modalities of centralization, diffusion, and balance¹³⁶ previously discussed within the practices of Brahmā's sound. Each element is described according to traditional Tibetan Buddhist definitions of their functions – water gathers, earth stabilizes, fire ripens, and wind impels. Here, though, the targets of each elemental activity are the outer environments and their inhabitant beings' experiences and activities. Thus, water gathers all phenomena of the mundane world and transcendence, earth stabilizes the mind and its appearances, fire ripens internal appearances within the body and external appearances in the environment, and wind both scatters apart and drives forward the activities of our bodies and minds.

1.2.2.2 The Sound of Five: Senses

The five senses are the next enumeration conjured by Viṣṇu's sounds. They deal with the construction of the sensory domains within the experience of mundane beings and is addressed via sensory contemplations.

“Five” means you train on the purity of what you perceive with your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. Train the eyes on diverse colors and shapes...Train the

¹³⁶ This is tied to other elemental calculation systems within the *Unimpeded Sound*, wherein every season is correlated with an element (Spring with earth, Summer with fire, Autumn with wind, and Winter with water). The three months of every season are also organized according to this trio of modalities (i.e., the first month is diffused, the second month is centralized, and the third month is balanced). Further, as we will witness in a later section of Viṣṇu's sound, each season, beginning with Spring, is associated with a quartet of functions: engagement, emergence, persistence, and reversal. It is tempting to correlate each element with one of these temporal functions. Unfortunately, this last system does not quite align with the explanation offered in this passage, wherein each element in has a period of engagement in which it moves through its three modes. Another possibility is at the level of elemental years, where the twelve years of the Tibetan astrological calendar are assigned to the four elements in their three modalities. This could project the Spring engagement in a water year, which has three modal months. This though, runs the problem of assigning the three modes of the elements to both years and months, part of a larger issue of interpretation as these calculations constantly switch between levels of time. For further details and analysis, see Devin Zuckerman's forthcoming dissertation.

ears with the wind. You can train on [the sound of] whatever instrument you feel like...

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp 123.6-124.5

All five senses are described in this way, focusing on a wealth of material sensory objects and procedures. These descriptions of the senses and contemplative practices also connect with other multi-sensory practices found throughout the text, sharing many of the same substances and processes. For example, the training on aural perception involves playing a musical instrument. This instrument is made by the practitioner themselves in these other sections which provide instructions. Training the gustatory and olfactory senses involves mixing pungent and intensely tasting herbs and fats together or fermenting one's own wine in the ground. While few of these revolve around the recitation of or listening to sound, they are presented as sites where the enumeration of Viṣṇu's numerical sounds have coalesced, demarcating these sensory boundaries for mundane beings, but also capable of purifying the sensory delusion therein.

1.2.2.3 The Sound of Six: Beings

The six realms of beings in the mundane world are the third enumeration Viṣṇu's sounds influence. Instead of a discussion about the beings themselves, though, this section revolves around the seasonal times of the year and the hourly times of the day that correspond to their activities. Time is overlaid with the quartet of engagement, emergence, persistence, and reversal discussed previously that describes the ways things are created, come into this world, remain, and depart – or in the case of the seasons, revert back to their beginnings.

“Six” refers to the six types of rebirths – gods, titans, humans, animals, tormented spirits, and hell-beings. This involves training at ... the four times of engaging, emerging, persisting, and reversing which we will calculate now.

The engagement [time] of the gods is the first month of Spring. [Their time of] emergence is the first month of Summer. [Their time of] persistence is [the first month of] Autumn. And [their time of] reversal is [the first month of] Winter. The titans are similar but involve the four middle months [of each three-month season]. Humans [correspond to] the four final months of each season.

The other three life forms [of animals, tormented spirits, and hell-beings] should be correlated with the twelve time periods of diffusion, centralization, [and balance] within one day. To expand on this, the two [time periods] of water and earth's centralization and the two [time periods] their diffusion [correspond to the times of] engaging, emerging, persisting, and reversing for animals. The two [time periods of] water and earth's balance and [the time periods of] fire and wind's centralization [correspond to] the tormented spirits. The two [time periods] of fire and wind's diffusion and the two [time periods] of their balance is the engagement, emergence, persistence, and reversal of hell beings.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp 128.1-6

These times mark when contemplative practices should be performed to address the enumerating sounds of Viṣṇu at the core of this six-fold system. While this seems like a highly specific complex system of time management, it is unfortunately not as clear as it seems. The connection between beings of different types with season and hours, the functions of the four types of time, and the actual practices remain unclear. Yet, we find again two interrelated systems of enumeration into which Viṣṇu's sounds have entered.

1.2.2.4 The Sound of Three: Mind

Finally, the trio of mental states is a brief accounting of the mind, though not one that finds resonance in normative Buddhist philosophy in the ways the five senses and six realms of beings did. The three mental states are the expressive mind (*brjod pa'i sems*), the conditioned mind (*rkyen sems*), and the naturally pure perceptions of mind (*rang bzhin sems kyi mthong ba rnam par dag pa*).¹³⁷ Little detail is provided about each of

¹³⁷ Such as those that arise during the visionary experiences of *Direct Crossing*. It is interesting that this is included in a list of mundane locations but is indicative of Great Perfection views in which the divide between the mundane and transcendent is blurred – where the ordinary mind *is naturally* the

these. The expressive mind seems to correspond to the ways we formulate verbal expression. The naturally pure perceptions may indicate the visionary experiences of the Direct Crossing contemplative practice in the Great Perfection. The conditioned mind is given the most explanation. It relates to the forty-two mental factors – aspects of our mind enumerated in traditional Buddhist philosophies which grasp at the world and change the way we interact with it. These include the five psycho-physical aggregates and six emotional afflictions, but also positive factors such as faith, diligence, and equanimity. While little is explained in this section, it remains another example of how the mundane world is inundated with systems of enumeration, such as the forty-two mental factors – all the domain of Viṣṇu’s sound.

1.2.3 *Kalapingka*

The legendary kalapingka bird, renowned for its melodies, is the third way that sound enters the world. This section reiterates the themes of sound located in the body, speech, and minds of beings. But instead of reifying language or compartmentalizing numbers, the sound of the kalapingka deals in aesthetics. It presents an imagination of the world where 360 transcendent melodies¹³⁸ are inherent resonances of beings’ physical bodies, the intonation of our speech, and the kinds of sounds we listen to and dream up.

However, as with the previous sections in the *Five Descents*, we are not attuned to these

transcendent mind.

¹³⁸ The translation of *dbyangs* as “melody” requires some reflection. The Tibetan term does not truly mean melody in the Western musical sense of the word, where pitches maneuver through harmonic sequences to find tension and resolution. In the *dag yig gsar bsgriqs* dictionary, it is defined more as contours of sound, its “highs and lows, its refinement or coarseness, and its [durations] of long and short.” However, colloquially, these contours of sound entail an aesthetic pattern, heard in both folk music and monastic ritual chanting. In this section itself on the teacher’s voice, *dbyang* is described as beautiful to hear (*snyan po*) and engaging to others (*gzhan ’jug par byed pa*). It is with these definitions in mind that I translate *dbyangs* as melody in this dissertation.

melodies. Thus, our physical, verbal, and mental aesthetics are flawed and mundane. Through proper contemplative training, though, these melodies can be reheard, and our mundane body, speech, and mind can be transformed.

This section is highly practical in nature, and I will leave much of the description of its contemplations for the third chapter on contemplative design. However, there are some key factors in its exposition of mundane imagination to be addressed here.

1.2.3.1 Physical Melodies

First, the contemplations of kalapingka's melodies are positioned as practices that can be done prior to Listening to the Elements, especially its physical practices – *Trulkhor*, or *Magic Wheel* ('*phrul 'khor*). This is a common term for a diverse set of physical practices that force movement of the winds through certain channels in the tantric body. The actual practices for individual traditions will differ, though they typically involve the systems of channels, winds, and essences discussed in tantric body literature and are held as preliminaries for other practices, such as heat yoga (*gtum mo*).

In kalapingka's *Magic Wheel* practice, one is attempting to attune to the 120 melodies located throughout the body. Normative Tibetan Buddhist tantric energy wheels are visualized at the navel, heart, throat, and crown of the head, typical of these kinds of practices. And the body is manipulated and positioned to alter the patterns of energy moving through the channels. However, the imagination of kalapingka's tantric body focuses on activating sounds located in the body. This takes up ideas presented in the commentary's introduction, where sounds were detailed as residing within the channels

of the body.¹³⁹ Many of these sounds appear to be the letters of the alphabet. We learn this through prescriptions for the practice itself, where one recites the letter families of the Sanskrit alphabet while snapping fingers and tapping certain parts of the body such as the heart-center of the chest. In this way, the *Unimpeded Sound* connects with other models of the body to imagine a physicality imbued with sound. It presents a new way to approach the body, the sounds it makes, and the sounds within, to align with a tantric-body sonority.

1.2.3.2 Verbal Melodies

The ways we use our speech is perhaps the easiest way to imagine melody in our lives. Yet, the presentation on speech here does not elaborate on it. Instead, it gives practical advice on a series of 120 training melodies. These are vocal intonation patterns and sounds the practitioner is told to recite presumably in order to expand and recalibrate their speech to attune with the 120 melodies of kalapingka which we have forgotten how to sing. It is tempting to correspond these to lists of the melodic qualities of Buddha's speech, as presented at the beginning of the *Unimpeded Sound*, yet the two lists do not find significant connection. However, the imagination between mundane speech and melodic awakened speech is supported throughout this text.

1.2.3.3 Mental Melodies

The aesthetics of the mind are about the ways we hear the world and produce beautiful words. The implicit argument held in these contemplations is that we are attentive to the wrong kinds of sounds in the world and in ourselves; that the words our minds compose

¹³⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 8.3-6.

are lacking. To remedy this failing of aesthetics, the text prescribes several contemplative practices.

The first involves following the course of one's breath. This may seem more relevant for the previous section on bodies, but here, I argue that the sound of one's breathing in and out is presented as a way of naturally pleasing mental attention to ourselves. Instead of listening to the many sounds of the body as it digests and creaks with age, or not hearing it at all, one is told to listen to kalapingka's melodies in the soothing sound of breathing. Likewise, our distracted attention to the sounds of the outside world is refocused onto the sounds of the elements, another nod to the centrality of that contemplation. Those sounds reattune one to natural aesthetics of our environments.

Finally, the text advises that one recites the vowels and consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet. There is a bit of play on the Tibetan terms for vowels as "melodic" (*dbyang can*), though in this case the Tibetan word *dbyang* indicating more the way vowels shape the consonants. While the text is again not explicit in its reasoning, I would contend that language is a way we add beauty to our words. Though the intonations and delivery of communication is the realm of speech, the choice and flourishes of words and poetics is a mental activity. Kalapingka's melodies are shown to reside within our language, and thus one trains in the alphabet to recapture that beauty.

1.2.4 *The Elements*

The sounds of the elements are the primary sites for aural contemplation in the *Unimpeded Sound*. The actual methods and experiences of such contemplation are detailed later in the text, in a practice called *Listening to the Elements*. Imagination for this practice, though, is constructed within the *Five Descents of Sound*. Elemental sounds

will be demonstrated as both connective and disjunctive. The sounds of the elements will be enumerated and divided according to systems of elemental gender, heat, and interrelation, making 4,000 different sounds. The external environment, though, is connected to the beings who reside within via the elements. This section will detail the ways cosmology and physiology intertwine; a foundational philosophical understanding employed in later contemplative practice. However, this connection also has emotionally charged repercussions that can continue the cycles of delusion.

1.2.4.1 Connections of Sounds

The sites of elemental sound reside, as expected, within the external locations of the four elements of water, earth, fire, and wind. However, they are also within beings. In a section etymologizing the word ‘elements’ which in Tibetan literally means ‘emergent,’ it draws this connection:

“Emergent elements” is as follows... Aware beings emerge in dependence on inanimate material. [In this way,] the four elements of the internal body emerge in dependence on the four external elements. Thus, they are “elements – emergent.”

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 144.2-3

Here, the author draws upon a dichotomy found throughout the text, living beings, who have the capacity of awareness (*rig pa*), and inanimate material (*ban pa*). The world, and its sounds, can be divided into these categories. In this passage, the author describes the process of how beings are made from material components. The implication of this is that there is a correlation between the elements of the external, material world, and the internal, aware beings. Thus, the passage maps out this process of emergence, in which the body’s four elements are formed based on the external four elements of the material environment.

The breakdown of material and animate sounds and the elemental and sonic connections between external environments and the beings within is significant for the construction of the *Unimpeded Sound*'s mundane imagination. It plots out their internal-external axis of imagination and discloses how the places these two sides connect. These points of connection will later be mobilized in performing the contemplative *Listening to the Elements* practice in which one aligns their elemental constitution with the corresponding external elemental sound to obtain the best results. In this way, the seemingly separate points on their imaginary chart resonate with each other and move beings between the mundane and the transcendent.

1.2.4.2 Divisions of Sounds

The main discussion here takes the form of distinctions between temperature and gendering of the elements, where hot and cold aspects of each of the four elements, as well as their masculine and feminine aspects, have impact on the world and beings. This is also where we are given an explanation for why space is not included within the paradigm of elements as the fifth element. Space is deemed 'neuter,' indicating it is without gender, and in this context, meaning that it cannot be factored into calculations about bodies and contemplative practice.

All four of those elements are two-fold, [including] the hot and cold versions of the elements. "One is neuter and empty." Since the neutral element of space [lacks gendered duality], it can't be factored into [the elemental calculations]. "From the distinctions of male and female" [elements], cold is from male water, heat is from female water. Likewise, earth is two-fold, fire is two-fold, and wind too includes the pair of [cold] male and [hot] female wind. [To expand on this, it is specifically] the wind aspect of each of those four elements that emerges as the efficient cause of the hot and cold elements.

In the context of living beings as well, the proximate cause of desire is due to a preponderance of female heat. The proximate cause of anger is due to a preponderance of male cold. And the proximate cause of ignorance is due to the

neutral [element of space,] since it cannot be differentiated at all in terms of hot and cold.

In this way, [the sounds of] the hot and cold divisions of elements [is as such]. The [sounds of the] female hot elements are 2,000-fold. To expand on that, the water aspect of water involves 125 [sounds]. [This is] likewise [calculated] for the earth of water, fire of water, and wind of water. Each [permutation involves] 125 [sounds]. This totals 2,000 sounds [across all sixteen permutations of the four elements]. Through combining these specific sounds of both male and female [elements], those 2,000 [sounds] are doubled. Thus, the sounds and meanings [of the elements] total 4,000 sounds.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 145.2-146.2

Gendered versions of the four elements are thus described to be productive of temperature differentiations. For each of the elements, cold is produced from its masculine component and heat from its feminine component. This difference is described as arising from each element's wind component. As will become important just below, part of the elemental knowledge system in play in the *Unimpeded Sound* is a subdivision of the elements, where each element contains all four elements. Thus, there is a water aspect of earth, and a fire aspect of wind. In this case, the wind aspect of each element – the wind of water, the wind of earth and so forth. – is causing the elements to become either hot or cold, which has two consequences here.

The first consequence is in terms of beings and the three basic afflictive emotions: desire, anger, and ignorance. Each of these are correlated with an elemental temperature as its proximate cause. Thus, the cause of desire in a being is having an imbalance towards hot elements, which are by their nature in the system previously presented, feminine. On the other hand, having too much elemental heat, coded masculine, is the cause for anger. Having an imbalance in neither direction (though importantly not a balance of elemental energy which is most often a positive in this system), there is the neuter element, space, the cause of ignorance in beings. Since all three results are

correlated with afflictions, primary difficulties to overcome on the Buddhist path, none are treated in a positive light here.

The second consequence of temperature and gender is found in the enumerations of elemental sound. Here, the text introduces interrelations between the elements. Each element contains aspects of all four elements. Thus, there is the water aspect of earth, and the fire aspect of wind. In this way, there are sixteen subdivisions to the elements.

In this passage, each elemental subtype is said to have 125 sounds associated with it. The text thus spells out that the water aspect of water has 125 sounds, as does the earth aspect of water and so forth. If you add together all sixteen subdivisions, and multiply that by 125 sounds for each subtype, the total is 2,000 sounds. However, this is only for one temperature-gender of the element. Thus, by taking into account both feminine-hot and masculine-cold sides of the elements, we come to a grand total of 4,000 elemental sounds. All 4,000 sounds are considered part of the training in the *Listening to the Elements* practice, though they are not all stated there.

These divisions of sound serve a slightly different function than the previous connections. While they do help to flesh out the mundane areas of the sonic imagination for both external environments and the beings internal to them, it also makes a claim on the nature of sound within the mundane world. Like the enumerations of Viṣṇu (which also referred to elemental divisions) the elements are broken apart, categorized, and codified according to this 4,000-fold schema of sound. They are also “conceptualized through grasping at the elements’ coarse and subtle [aspects and sounds,] ... and grasping at the elements as autonomous”¹⁴⁰ As we hear these sounds, we fixate on them and

¹⁴⁰ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.4-5.

conceptually elaborate on them according to perceived differences. Elemental sounds persist through time, and we think they are self-contained and continuous. The material world is thus compartmentalized and substantiated through the ways we hear sound.

On top of this, the emotional afflictions reified by language heard through Brahmā are also activated by these sounds. Cold sounds of the male elements make us angry. Hot sounds of their female counterparts fill us with desire. The sound of space just leaves us with delusion. Thus, elemental sound is acting to continue these cycles of affliction that keep us in the mundane world. The sounds of the natural world conceal the truth. However, they will also be the major sites of revelation – a fact proven by the teacher’s voice.

1.2.5 *The Teacher’s Voice*

Finally, the teacher’s voice is unique in that it does not reside in places of delusion but targets them. The sixty sounds of an awakened teacher’s voice can reach out to sixty aspects of our sensory perception – the ways we understand the world. These sounds arriving at such locations opens up our understanding of the mundane world and reality.

Many of the descriptions here involve the sonic nature and beings of transcendence. These teachers awaken from *Listening to the Elements*, and their voice delivers listeners to a state of hearing linguistic sound according to reality – as “phonemes bereft of nominal [grasping].”¹⁴¹ I will return to these ideas in the next chapter on transcendent imagination. However, the section does detail unique imaginations of our mundane sensory perception and the ways that sound can purify them.

¹⁴¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.6.

The sixty distinctive qualities [of the senses implicated in that process are as follows.]:

The six senses [are interrelated: There is] the eye's ear, the eye's nose, the eye's tongue, the eye's body, the eye's mind, and the eye's eye. The ear and the other senses are [interrelated] likewise. Each is purified [via the teacher's voice]. In addition to [these thirty-six], there are the six supporting sense organs, the six supporting sense objects, the six special methods of [sensory] training, and the six natural sensory essences, [totaling] sixty. This is the case for [all six realms of living beings including] the gods and so forth.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp 150.2-4

Living beings are discussed according to their sensory capacities. However, in addition to the standard six Buddhist senses,¹⁴² the passage presents a sixty-fold order of the senses. These include interrelated permutations of the senses as seen in the elements, where each sense has six different sensory aspects such as the aural aspect of vision, or the tactile aspect of olfaction. These thirty-six permutations are unfortunately not elaborated but open a more granular understanding of what it means to be a sensing being for the *Unimpeded Sound*.

Four more sets of six are added to these. The six sense organs and sensory objects, which are not given the same permutations as sensory perception, complete the three-part sensory domains, as discussed with the *Secret Matrix*. The six methods of training involve the six contemplative sensory practices discussed above in the imagination on Viṣṇu and elsewhere in the text. The six sensory essences complete the requisite sixty, though these too are left undiscussed. All sixty sensory categories are found within each of the six types of beings.

These sixty aspects of sensory engagement with the world align in number with

¹⁴² This typology typically includes the mind as a sixth sense.

traditional Buddhist imaginations around the Buddha's sixty qualities of speech, a list included at the beginning of this chapter in the *Unimpeded Sound*. In addition, when the Buddha, or teacher, speaks, all sixty of these sensory capacities are purified and beings of all six types are "made to understand" through the teacher "melodic, sonorous, and engaging [voice]."¹⁴³ Thus, we can presume that these sixty melodic qualities of the Buddha's voice are targeting and purifying the sixty sensory capacities of beings, leading them to transcendent realizations.

While the senses are cast here as tools of delusion, needing to be purified, sound is the mechanism that reveals transcendence to beings. This includes a detailed list of transcendent sensory experiences that I will discuss in the third chapter, but which include the ability to perceive hidden things with the aural sense of vision. At the same time, the passage is fleshing out our understanding of the sensory capacities of beings in the mundane world. They do not just see, hear, and so forth, but rather they see with the nose's eye, and hear with the tongue's ear, an intriguing yet obscure sensory orientation. Finally, the numbering of these senses combined the teacher's "melodious" voice implies the guiding factor of the Buddha's sixty qualities of speech. This traditional sonic system appears to have informed the ways the *Unimpeded Sound* has conjured their imagination around the resonant objects of those sixty vocal modes – these sixty sensory capacities.

¹⁴³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.5-6.

Chapter 2: Interpreting Mundane Sonic Imaginations

The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras present dense and complex imaginations of sound and the mundane world. While I argue that they are making specific religious and philosophical moves in their imaginations, it often is obtuse, hidden among confusing logic, disorganized material, and competing purposes of philosophical intrigue and contemplative prescription, which are often inexorably interwoven at this time in Tibetan Buddhism. In this chapter, I will reflect on the broader positions and claims I find these texts making with reference to the mundane world. I argue that the work both texts are performing in these philosophical realms constitutes their mundane imaginations and sets up pathways for imagining transcendence and contemplatively moving between the two poles of experience.

Specifically, I contend that these textual traditions are engaged in philosophy of sound and the mundane world at three levels: ontological, epistemological, and cosmological. Having taken sound as a foundational principle, they are responding to questions of how the sonic metaphor and both traditional and novel structures of sound might be used as frameworks for imagining the world; how sounds, and specifically language, might function as a source of delusion in this world, concealing from us the knowledge of reality; and how can be used to reconsider our organizations of our micro and macro cosmologies, as well as their possible connections. Through these interpretive explorations, we will also consider the divergent ways that both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* move through these areas of philosophical and imaginative inquiry, whereby the former will tend to follow normative tantric ideations of sonic ontology, epistemology, and cosmology, and the latter will tend to innovate on these traditional stances. While they are distinct in their approaches, I argue that these three issues remain

central to their sonic imaginations and are necessary foundations for their projects of creating affective atmospheres.

2.1 Mundane Sonic Ontologies

Many religions and cultural systems use the senses as touchstones for their ontologies, both of the mundane world and of the transcendent. These are fundamental metaphors, symbols, and structures for understanding the makeup and organization of the world. Some revolve around the sense of temperature, whereby colors, food, and speech are classified as hot or cold,¹⁴⁴ others use smell or taste that become platforms for thinking about the virtue of people based on their fragrance¹⁴⁵ or for systematizing our internal beliefs based on the foods we consume or avoid.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps the most common sense used for such ontologies is vision. Matthew Kapstein's edited volume, *The Presence of Light* exemplifies the ways a variety of religious use metaphors and experiences of divine light to understand the world. But these systems of divine light extend to the ways such traditions consider the mundane world as well. Illuminationist philosophy constructs a meta-language based on light which is used to describe even practical and political matters, such as the legitimacy of a ruler being measured in their manifest 'luminosity.'¹⁴⁷ In the Hindu tantric of Abhinavagupta, the ontology of the mundane is not separate from the supreme light of the divine, even though it appears as diversity and obscuration rather than unified clarity. The metaphor of 'a flame within a flame' uses

¹⁴⁴ Classen Constance, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 124.

¹⁴⁵ McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*, 57.

¹⁴⁶ Patricia Rodrigues de Souza, "Candomblé Eating Myths: Religion Stated in Food Language" in *Sensual Religion*, eds. Graham Harvey and Jessica Hughes (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2018): 105.

¹⁴⁷ Hossein Ziai, "Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light" in *The Presence of Light*, ed. Matthew Kapstein, 26-28.

light to describe the way the two can appear different but remain the same.¹⁴⁸

These sensory metaphors provide “background orientations through which everything we perceive, feel, think, and act upon is structured.”¹⁴⁹ These sensorily defined orientations can then be systematized in ontologies of religious traditions shaping the way they approach the mundane world. As we will see with the letter-correspondences of the *Secret Matrix* and the *Five Descents* of the *Unimpeded Sound*, such metaphors can comprise systems of “imaginative rationality... creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience.”¹⁵⁰ Lakoff and Johnson understood this kind of metaphorical function at play in aesthetic experiences, though will I argue that they also apply to religious ones, especially those based in the senses.

Finally, such metaphoric sensory orientations defined by imaginative rationality can contribute to affective atmospheres. In Heidegger’s exploration of the term *stimmung* (a precursor to the idea of atmosphere used in this dissertation¹⁵¹), he compares it to a musical atmosphere that “sets the tone for such being [of man], i.e. attunes and determines the manner and way of his being.”¹⁵² One of the functions of atmospheres is to set this baseline tone to which one can attune and perceive the world and themselves in

¹⁴⁸ Paul E. Muller-Ortega, “Luminous Consciousness: Light in the Tantric Mysticism of Abhinavagupta” in *The Presence of Light*, 61-63.

¹⁴⁹ Achim Stephan, “Emotions, Existential Feelings, and Their Regulation,” *Emotion Review* 4, no.2 (2012): 158.

¹⁵⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980): 235.

¹⁵¹ For a history of the term, see Gerhard Thonhauser, “Beyond Mood and Atmosphere: A Conceptual History of the Term *Stimmung*,” *Philosophia* 49 (2021): 1247-1265.

¹⁵² Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67. For further consideration of Heidegger’s connection to atmospheres, see Andrea Andiloro, “‘This Must Be the Place’: Understanding Video Game Placeness Through Atmosphere and the Refrain in *Dark Souls*,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 14, no.2 (2022): 207-223.

specialized ways. Sensory ontologies provide this framework, contributing to the attunement process by organizing philosophical thought and contemplative practice around a core metaphor, in this case sound.

In our texts, the choice to use sound as a primary ontological touchstone for imagining the mundane world has a variety of implications. The systems of sound that are used inform and shape the contours and boundaries for the rubrics used to imagine the mundane world. For example, the fact that a letter family in Sanskrit contains five letters means that corresponding philosophical systems also need to be imagined in groups of five. Thus, we get the five aggregates, the five elements, and the five senses.

These organizational factors of a sonically based ontology can be limiting. The *Five Descents of Sound* all require a source of sound to guide their mundane imaginations. Choices were made to use linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, and natural sounds as organizing principles, but other options that rely on visual, cognitive, or emotional ontological metaphors are abandoned or relegated to minor positions. However, these limits can incite creativity, as we will witness in the way the *Secret Matrix* overcomes numerical limits of the alphabet.

They can also offer affordances, new ways to envision familiar topics. For example, both texts reimagine the tantric body according to sounds. The photic and thermodynamic tantric body traditionally organized through colorful channels and energy hubs is filled with sounds. The *Secret Matrix* uses traditional Sanskrit articulation theories to begin its sonic-photic body, as the light of *A* emits to each location. The *Unimpeded Sound* also includes a description of a sonic body that rings with a natural sonority, though its letters are more esoterically placed. Instead of light, it imagines a process of attunement with

these sounds that involves material engagement – tapping the chest and snapping one’s fingers while letters are recited – ways the body would not be considered in a visual ontology. Thus, we find both systems take previous imaginations of the body and reshape them according to the new systems and affordances of sound they prioritize.

In the remainder of this section, we will focus on the main ontological bases of sound for each of these texts: the linguistic sounds of the alphabet for the *Secret Matrix*, and a broader soundscape that attempts to systematize all sound within five types in the *Unimpeded Sound*. Exploring these will help us understand the implications of the choices these texts made to prioritize sound in their ontologies of the mundane world, and how those implications affect their larger projects.

2.1.1 Linguistic Sounds of the Secret Matrix

The sounds humans make – our language, enumerations, and intonations – constitute a major category of sound with which these texts imagine their mundane worlds. Among those, language is central for the *Secret Matrix* and persistent throughout the *Unimpeded Sound*, despite its elemental emphasis. Sometimes, language is described directly, as through the philosophical discussion around the pot in the *Secret Matrix*. However, most often, it is signified by the alphabet, the foundational parts of language.

In the *Secret Matrix*, the alphabet is the core sonic ontological basis for organizing the mundane world. As discussed above, the alphabet’s structure sets limits for the imagination of mundane aspects of the world. The alphabet has five families of five-letters each, four semi-vowels, three sibilants, one aspirate, one compound, and eight vowels (or nine if you include the inherent *A*). Those numbers set the parameters for the *Secret Matrix*’s mundane imagination. It needs rubrics whose number is five to match

onto the letter families. It needs a four-fold rubric to match the semi-vowels. However, the *Secret Matrix* also finds creativity within those limits. They play with numbers and groupings, for example by grouping the aspirate with the three semivowels to create another group of four. They also use inherent aspects of letter organization to create connections in the construction of the mundane world discussed above.

The order of the letter index in the *Secret Matrix* has always seemed strange to me. It begins in the middle, with the **Ṭa** and **Ta** letter families. Even the commentator adjusts this back to the normal alphabetical ordering begging with the **Ka** family when he presents his short index. It's like starting to sing the English alphabet **N, O, P, Q...** its just jarring. This choice though, gives us insight into the logic of the system, especially its emphasis on connecting the external world of the environment to the internal world of living beings. We find that these connections are systematized according to the organization of the letters.

The aggregates and elements, both foundational, concise, and traditionally five-fold ways to understand ourselves and the world, are corresponded to the **Ṭa** and **Ta** families. The letters of these families are intertwined in both Tibetan phonetics and visual design. Their sounds are almost imperceptible for non-native speaker to Sanskrit, as the retroflex sound is not typically used in Tibetan.¹⁵³ Likewise, their visual form is simply a horizontal reversal.

¹⁵³ There are exceptions to this of course, especially in the use of transliterated Sanskrit words used in Tibetan Buddhist ritual or educational contexts.



Each individual letter echoes and mirrors their counterpart in the other family, both in letters and in mundane ideas. Traditional ways of corresponding the elements to the aggregates, such as the aggregate of consciousness with space, and earth with physical form, are supported and accentuated through the use of such similar letters. This creates a model that carries the imagination through the other letter families.

Sensory perception and objects are a natural five-fold pair that the *Secret Matrix* can utilize in such an imagination. Following the rubric from the previous letter families, it matches each sense to letter in the five-fold sequence. Thus, the first letter in both the ***Ka*** and ***Ca*** families deals with vision, and the second letter with hearing. Even though the mirrored sounds and forms of the ***Ṭa*** and ***Ta*** families is gone, their influence is still felt.

The sense organs signified by the final letter family ***Pa***, though, present an interesting dilemma for the *Secret Matrix*. It needs to pair the sense organs with the four times to satisfy broader goals of the letter-index, such as meeting constraints of the transcendent pantheon, which it simultaneously balances. The commentary presents a reason why sense organs and time might correspond, though it is brief and unconvincing. However, when the commentary discusses these organs and their function in the mundane imagination, it prefers to connect them to the two other sensory spheres – perception and

object – instead of the four times. It does this in two ways: through the order of its five letters and through a verbal metaphor.

The order of the five letters is simply the same as heard in the connection between sensory perceptions and sensory objects. Again, for the sense organs, the first letter of the *Pa* family aligns with vision, the second with hearing, and so forth. While it feels like a natural fit, it is making a claim onto where it belongs in the mundane imagination and to what it connects. Connecting the five sense organs with the four times is a strain on the text and does not fit with the wider philosophical context in which the senses have three spheres – perception, organ, and object. By plotting the sense organs onto the last letter family in the same way as the previous sensory spheres, the letter index is able to place it with the other senses while maintaining its official pairing with the four times.

The second way the *Secret Matrix* accomplishes this is by using a verbal metaphor. The text considers the connection between perception and its object to be a process of communication, arguing that “there is communication in the meeting of sensory perception and sensory object. This communication occurs in reliance on the sense organs, which serve to illuminate things.”¹⁵⁴ Verbal mediation is thus used as the metaphorical tool to connect the three domains of the senses. In certain ways, this stands in tension with the sense organs’ letters pairing with the semi-vowels signifying time and we start to see the limits of their alphabetical ontology. However, sense organs as a sort of sensory verbal communication will prove to align with transcendent imagination around the letter index, wherein the three sensory domains and their letters are mapped across the three awakened attributes of body, speech, and mind, with awakened speech

¹⁵⁴ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 374.5-6.

serving its function of illuminating communication.

The limits of the numbering system in the alphabet have another ramification for the *Secret Matrix*'s sonic imagination. The tactile domain for each sensory sphere does not correlate with its natural counterpart. Tactile perception does not meet the tactile object in the same way that olfaction meets smells. The specter of the ill-fated pairing between sense organs and time looms again. In trying to combine a five-fold and four-fold system, one member is lost. What to do with the fifth sensory organ – the tactile organ of the body? The text acrobatically proceeds to recruit the other tactile members of the letter-index to make a new four-fold system, which coincidentally aligns with the four erroneous philosophical views of other schools. Obviously, this is no coincidence as that four-fold system also represents a choice in the way the *Secret Matrix* imagines a broader mundane world based on the available structures of the alphabet. It also heavily depends on the transcendent imagination, where four-fold wrathful pairs of gatekeepers were necessary and found their mundane positions in the body – a connection between the mundane and transcendent that will prove to have its own implications.

A final mystery for the letter-index in the *Secret Matrix*, is its choice to begin with the second letter of the retroflex *Ṭa* family – *Ṭha*. We have discussed reasons why the Ṭa and Ta family may have been prioritized within this sonic imagination. But why start with the retroflex family that falls outside standard Tibetan orthography, and within that, the second letter? One possibility is that the text may have been virtue signaling to highlight it as an authentic Indian teaching.¹⁵⁵ The retroflex family is the most distinctly

¹⁵⁵ First, aligns with ideas of Indian authenticity. Tibetans during the renaissance of the 11th-12th centuries were highly concerned about the authenticity of their sources of Buddhist literature. Only Indian texts were considered genuine teachings. While this had the effect of prioritizing and funding trips to India to

Sanskrit letter family in the alphabet. Because it is not used in Tibetan orthography, it is distinct and easily connected to an Indian language source. And while the first letter of the retroflex *Ta* family is sometimes used in common foreign words or as shorthand in Tibetan calligraphy, the second letter *Tha* is almost never used. It is uniquely distinct within the alphabet.

A second possibility correlates with our understanding of the organization of sensory letters in this index. As discussed above, the first letter is for the visual domain and the second is for the aural domain. This is repeated three times in the index. It is tempting to follow that logic and apply it to the aggregates and elements. It is certainly not a complete mapping between these systems. However, the prioritization of sound within the *Secret Matrix* may have influenced their choice to use the second family letter, associated with sound throughout their mundane imagination, for their primary mundane (and transcendent) imaginations of consciousness and space. There is little to substantiate these claims, though they incite curiosity to dig deeper.

2.2.2 Holistic Sounds of the Unimpeded Sound

The *Unimpeded Sound* uses a system of five descents to present a sort of holistic account for sounds of the world: linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, material, and doctrinal. These five types of sound serve as the framework for the *Unimpeded Sound*'s sonic ontology.

recover and translated these authentic materials, it also fostered innovation in the ways Tibetan writing presented itself. Both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* were implicated in this. For the *Unimpeded Sound*, it found recourse in the burgeoning Treasure tradition. The commentary is traditionally accredited to Vimalamitra, an Indian philosopher, though for reasons outlined in the introduction, we know this is not the case and it was almost certainly of Tibetan origin. However, by using this Indian name and giving the text a Sanskrit title, the text is able to virtue signal its authenticity. The *Secret Matrix* was also a target of critiques around authenticity and is even cited as one of the reasons why the later translation schools returned to India in the first place. While there are sustained modern academic arguments for its Indian origins, there remains a possibility that the *Secret Matrix* needed to prove itself in this way.

Their organizational constraints and opportunities are perhaps best exemplified by Viṣṇu's numerical sounds. This sound in the form of numbers affects the choices the text makes to construct their mundane imagination. It finds recourse in two classically enumerated categories of the mundane world – the five senses and the six types of beings – taking this opportunity to detail them in ways that are resonant with broader themes in the *Unimpeded Sound*, such as with deep material engagement via the senses and discussions of elemental time with the types of living beings. In addition, it creates new enumerations to attend to other dynamics in the text, such as the five pervasions that connect the elements to the body, speech, and mind (with a double dose of speech), and the four engagements that again return to elemental time – a significant discourse throughout the text. The discussions within the imagination on Viṣṇu's sound are thereby foundationally influenced by the text's choice of numerical sounds.

The rest of the five descents act in similar ways. the alphabet for the *Unimpeded Sound* invokes understandings of language, as it does with the *Secret Matrix*. Given Brahmā's connection to the alphabet in the contemplative practices on his sounds, he is thus seen as a source of language in the world. The text decides to correlate this linguistic sound to the aggregates and the emotional afflictions. It reimagines them not as sets of enumerations or intimately paired with the six-fold typology of living beings, but as linguistic constructions. It is making an implicit argument that the ways we exist in the world and the feeling that continue our suffering and straying are based in a fundamental misunderstanding of language. Used in this faulty way, language reifies our notions about ourselves which we then grasp at, causing further emotional turmoil.

Melodies perhaps strain these choices in imagination the most in their attempts to

address the body, speech, and mind of living beings. Melodic sound within speech is a natural choice for the text, and possibly the reason the rubric of body, speech, and mind was used in the first place. However, speech is the least fleshed out member of this presentation, merely giving a series of intonational patterns to practice reciting. The text, however, uses this opportunity to discuss the tantric body mentioned above. Here, it can present a *Magic Wheel* physical yoga practice for those not ready for *Listening to the Elements*. However, its inclusion in a section detailing melodic aesthetics influences the ways these practices are considered and performed. Body percussion is played with tapping and snapping while the letters of the alphabet are recited. And the body of letters takes on new valences as melodic in nature, not merely sonic or photic. Likewise, the mind's attention is presented in line with the prompt of melodic sound. What is melodic for the mind? The text answers this not with music, but with natural sounds of our body breathing and the elemental sounds of the material world. Thus, it informs us of aesthetic preferences in the *Unimpeded Sound*, while highlighting our bodies and the elements as naturally aesthetically pleasing – an understanding that will further inform listening to the sounds of the elements.

The sound of the elements is the central system for the *Unimpeded Sound*. Its inclusion in the group of five sources of sound in the world points to the material realm as a major sonic component of the world. The sounds of the world have two primary divisions in the *Unimpeded Sound*: those made by living beings and those made by material things. Living beings are responsible for language, numbers, and some of the world's melodies. However, the elements are the source of material sound. In order to account for the diverse possibilities of the material world, the text posits 4,000 different

sounds of the elements, the most of any section, differentiated by interrelated elements and their temperature-gender. And while living beings make their own sounds, they are still material creatures, reliant in their physicality on the elements of the world. This imagination has implications for contemplative practice seen throughout the five descents, but especially in *Listening to the Elements* discussed later.

Finally, the model of sixty melodic qualities of the Buddha's speech is turned around to imagine the sensory capacities of living beings who take in the sounds of the teacher's voice. Instead of sixty aspects of speech, we are thus presented with sixty aspects of the senses. This target number seems to have generated creativity in ways to consider the senses, including interrelations, similar to those calculated with the elements, that conjure a host of new granular sensory imaginations. A second traditional piece of lore is that the Buddha's voice can reach anyone through his skillful means. This may have begun as a way to convey either the historical Buddha's ability to speak in different registers depending on the student, or as apologetics for scriptural inconsistencies. However, here, this imagination bridges the types of living beings, who are all included in this new enumeration of sensory capacities, as they all too are recipients of the sixty qualities of a Buddha's speech. In this way, the system of sound implicated in the teacher's voice impacted the ways the text was able to imagine a mundane world, inciting innovation and connection.

2.2 Concealing Epistemologies of Sound

Sound in the *Secret Matix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras reverberates throughout the mundane world. It is heard in language, numbers, and melodies. It expresses itself in and through our bodies and our natural environments. And its vibrations ring through the

cosmos. But is it telling us the truth, or is it deceiving us? Within their imaginations on sound, both texts present epistemological arguments about the nature of sound and its connection to either our state of delusion in the mundane world or true knowledge of the reality of transcendence. Often, as Abe suggests with the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric, the way we know, or are ignorant, of the world it is a matter of perspective.¹⁵⁶

I find that both traditions present sound as fulfilling dual epistemological roles – it both conceals and reveals. Sound conceals, often through language, by naming and numbering the things of the world, such that they become reified and consolidated into discrete phenomena. Historically in Indian and tantric philosophy, these kinds of normative rule-governed types of language were considered the furthest from transcendence and used for inferior purposes.¹⁵⁷ Our texts likewise assert that our ideas of self and other, subject and object, substantiate and calcify through referential errors in language and communication. The simple words “me” and “you” lead to differentiation and grasping – markers of the mundane world and its suffering. This also happens in other ways. Simply hearing the sounds of our environments seems to prove the existence of the material world, its persistence through time, and its separation from ourselves.

As we will discover in Part II, by hearing these sounds in new ways, such boundaries between each other and the world dissolve, revealing an underlying truth. The texts imagine that the very sounds of the alphabet and the elements that deluded us can instead be used to free us. They chart the ways these sounds move between mundane

¹⁵⁶ Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 12.

¹⁵⁷ André Padoux, *Tantric Mantras: Studies on Mantrasastra*. (New York: Routledge, 2011): 3.

concealment and transcendent revelation. The nature of that truth will be discussed further in chapters three and four on transcendent sonic imaginations. And the methods of listening and reciting that move one along those sonic pathways will be saved for Part III on the contemplative design of aural atmospheres. Here, we will attend to the ways both texts imagine a world concealed by sound and the ways sound might address the problems it created.

Jonardon Ganeri notes that “metaphors of concealment suffuse Indian debate.”¹⁵⁸ The first two truths of the nobles quoted at the outset of this Part I is based on such concealment. The reason we suffer, according to traditional Buddhism, is our ignorance of reality. But what elicits or prevents such salvific knowledge? For Indian religion and philosophy, upon which Tibetan Buddhism is based, the answer often lays with the senses. Concealing and revelatory epistemologies are thus often built upon sensory metaphors. You can know the karmic standing of another by how much they stink,¹⁵⁹ and seeing is a form of knowing in the Brahmanas and in *pramāna* theory.¹⁶⁰ In Persia, the light symbolism of the Illuminationist theory of knowledge also contended that knowing happens through sight, with the degree of luminosity of the subject directly proportional to their capacity for knowledge.¹⁶¹ In tantric contexts closer to our own texts, we see how mystical light can be obscured. Abhinavagupta considered the divine light of Śiva to be “self-concealing” to help account for the difference between non-dual supreme light

¹⁵⁸ Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 9.

¹⁶¹ Ziaj, “Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light,” 26-27.

and diverse manifestations that cause obscuration and delusion.¹⁶²

I find that sound follows these ideas, the *Secret Matrix* following more normative tantric ideas of language and knowledge, and the *Unimpeded Sound* disclosing novel and more holistic ways that sound affects our knowledge of the world. Overall, discussions of concealed knowing for both texts, I argue, serve as indicators of the initial state of practitioners, the baseline status quo necessary for the unfolding and becoming of the affective process.¹⁶³ Discussions on transcendence, likewise, will provide the second half to this affective differential, at least in discourse, while the contemplations will take practitioners between the two types of knowing – concealed and revealed. In the end, this change in one’s knowing will be a central aspect of the affective atmosphere. As atmospheres are the coming together and mutual transformation of subjective perception and objective reality, the ways we know and perceive the world will both influence the tone of the atmosphere and be changed within it. For now, I will examine the ways both textual traditions describe our current state of knowledge as it is concealed by linguistic, numerical, and material sound.

2.2.1 Language

Language has been thoroughly philosophized in traditional Buddhist literature, which often decries it as sources of delusion. These tantras take those claims seriously, though as we will hear, creatively find them as a source of rupture for this mundane world as well. The *Secret Matrix* is centrally focused on language and the alphabet, positing that all the things we consider existent and whole are nothing more than the names we give

¹⁶² Muller-Ortega, “Luminous Consciousness,” 60-62.

¹⁶³ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 78. Here he cites Massumi and Deleuze to discuss the workings of affect.

them. Language thus conceals the truth of reality from us. The text demonstrates this through logical argument and alphabetical correspondence. They take up Buddhist forms of logical analysis to prove that for example, while we think we have a pot, there is truly nothing to be found there other than the name “pot.” In this way, all language is not truly referential and faulty.

Likewise, the correspondences of the letter index present a mundane world that arises due to the foundational components of language – letters. These one-to-one correlations detail all types of phenomena in the mundane world, including those of our environments and the living beings within, including ourselves. When perceived incorrectly, the letters arise as the internal and external phenomena that make up delusion and suffering. As we will uncover in their mundane cosmology, these correspondences chart out the entirety of our mundane existence. Thus, the letters appear to be responsible for our confusion and the concealing of our knowledge of reality at a complete scale – we have no knowledge in the world that is not affected by the concealing nature of letters.

It is only when the letters are purified that concealing sound can become revealing sound. We will discuss what that revelation looks like and how it is achieved in the next two parts. However, here, we are provided a third critique of language that leads towards that transcendent epistemology. In addition to language’s capacity to deceive with false-referentiality and their ability to generate deluded phenomena, we are told that language is weak – it cannot stand up to the violent force of awakened sound. This plays out as a vibrational revelation that tears through the material world. This scene presents a picture of the mundane world as conceived by concealing language that falls apart when the alphabet, now implicated as mantra, reverberates across it. I contend that we are meant to

see the fragility of a linguistically constructed world via this short narrative, priming us to accept their transcendent epistemology, where letters reveal the divine pantheon and reality itself.

The *Unimpeded Sound* shares this fascination with language, though it widens its scope to include numerical sounds and the aesthetics of verbal communication. In its mundane imagination, language functions to reify conceptions of ourselves, including the psycho-physical and emotional processes that make us up. This is depicted in the descent of Brahmā's sound, where the alphabet is implicated as his sound. It may have transcendent potential, but the text claims that it congeals into our five psycho-physical aggregates, whereby these foundations of language delude us into limiting ourselves to these processes of self. Further, our habits of enumerating and grouping phenomena compartmentalize and concretize them as shown in Viṣṇu's numerical sounds that substantiate the five senses and the six types of living beings, among other groups. Finally, they posit that our verbal intonation has lost its ability to aesthetically communicate and deliver knowledge in the ways that the Buddha speaks. This requires intonation training described in the sections on Kalapingka's sound. Thus, a broader view of language and verbal communication is presented in the *Unimpeded Sound* to indicate the many faults of language and its capacity to deceive us. But for the *Unimpeded Sound*, as well, these linguistically oriented sounds are already transcendent, merely misunderstood. It will require a change in perception to use and hear sound as part of a transcendent epistemology of revelation, a process these texts aim to achieve through the production of atmosphere.

2.2.2 Materiality

The sounds of the material world also conceal the truth of reality from living beings. The *Secret Matrix* does not speculate on the nature of material sounds in the same way as the *Unimpeded Sound*, nor does it include any in its contemplative practice. While the material world is shaken in its vibrational revelation, it is the sonic intensity of the letters of the alphabet that affect the material world, and thus still focuses on critiques of language rather than discussions of the nature of materiality.

By contrast, the *Unimpeded Sound* revels in the sounds of the material world, championing them in their central contemplative practice, *Listening to the Elements*. However, like the linguistic sounds of the other sonic sources, the sounds of the elements also deceive. Grasping onto their sounds leads to conceptions of the material world as autonomous and distinct from us. It gives rise to a diverse array of distinct classifications, already warned against in Viṣṇu's enumerations. They are also described as leading to emotional affliction of desire and anger. Thus, the sounds of the elements substantiate our idea of a mundane material world. However, as with the other sources of sound, these are ultimately found to be transcendent in nature. And their externality is intimately connected with our internal makeup, bridging the gap in subjectivity created by our grasping. Thus, the sounds that generated this sense of the mundane world are imagined as tools of transcendence.

For both texts, sound thus has the power to deceive and reveal, providing contrasting sets of epistemologies. Here, we have focused on the former, the ways that our knowledge of reality has been concealed by sound, though ultimately, these two modes of epistemology are intricately tied for these texts. To accomplish its mundane epistemology, the *Secret Matrix* relies entirely on linguistic faults, employing logical

argumentation against referential language, a letter index that shows how every phenomenon was generated from a bit of language, and narrative descriptions of language's fragility. When the *Unimpeded Sound* imagines the impact of language, it does so instead with not only words, but with numbers and aesthetics, demonstrating a wide interest in the communicatory capacities of beings and the ways that affects knowing. However, it chiefly focuses on the sounds of the natural world, with philosophies and contemplations that are deeply material in character. And while the *Secret Matrix* uses forceful metaphors of cosmos shaking epistemology more in line with the kinds of forceful aesthetics and contemplations of Mahāyoga, the *Unimpeded Sound's* mundane imagination presents a natural transcendence of sound characteristic of the Great Perfection.

2.3 Sonic Cosmologies of the Mundane

Third, we find that these textual traditions use sound as a way to conceive of, and map out, the mundane world. Classen finds this cosmological function of sensory models present in a range of cultures and religions. She observes cosmological models based on heat, smell, and color.¹⁶⁴ A cosmos organized around ideas of heat, for example with the Tzotzil people in Mexico, describes places, directions, the time of day, and annual festivals all in terms of their perceived temperature – the hotter the better – such that the East and West are emergent and waning heat respectively, and morning is the time of heat rising while afternoon is the time of heat falling. Living beings, too, are accounted for in such cosmology, with males being considered hotter than females and with heat

¹⁶⁴ Classen, "Chapter 6: Worlds of Sense" in *Worlds of Sense*, 121-138.

rising throughout the course of one's life. Thermal symbolism thus pervades Tzotzil concepts of their cosmos from the human to the macro levels.

Light is, of course, another major sensory orientation towards the cosmos. We have already noted the tantric writer Abhinavagupta's conception of supreme light self-concealing as the manifest world. But that light is also considered as a way to understand the organization of the cosmos. As the light congeals into the world of form, it is said to emerge as the thirty-six tattvas, or cosmic principles of being that compose the world, ultimately resulting in the limiting experiences of ourselves as individuals performing actions in a diverse world.¹⁶⁵ In addition, Abhinavagupta connects the internal and external cosmologies through metaphors of light: the perceiving subject is likened to fire, the process of knowing is the sun, and the objective world is described as the moon.¹⁶⁶ These correspondences help Abhinavagupta move between cosmological levels, describing and prescribing mystical experiences of light that will allow one to perceive the ultimate light of Śiva. We will find that such correlations between the macro and micro level will be at play for our textual traditions as well, serving similar functions.

Sound is also used for such cosmological imaginings in India and beyond. In Feld's trail-blazing ethnography of the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, he found that bird calls were considered the spirit reflections of the deceased. Sound, there, helped "construct culturally metaphoric ideals from natural historical observations" and produce metaphoric human societies that resounded with Kaluli sentiment.¹⁶⁷ Using an avian soundscape, they were thus able to construct a sonic cosmology of the afterlife. In tantric

¹⁶⁵ Muller-Ortega, "Luminous Consciousness," 63.

¹⁶⁶ Muller-Ortega, "Luminous Consciousness," 64.

¹⁶⁷ Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*, 30-31.

thought, mantras are intricately tied with understandings and constructions of the cosmos at different levels of hierarchy, such that “mantras must be seen in a cosmological context.”¹⁶⁸ Mantras locate an initiate within a larger organization of the tantra’s imagined world and are taken up in ritual practice to tie practitioner’s bodies to the external cosmos.¹⁶⁹

Here again, we find the importance of internal-external connections within cosmologies mediated by sensory metaphors and systems. These will be imagined further at levels of transcendence and contemplatively mobilized in ritual practice for our texts. This sonic imagination of mundane cosmology, though, is a fundamental step in the creation of the affective atmospheres for the texts. As Dufrenne notes with aesthetic experience, an ‘expressed world’ overflows to create aesthetic forms of affect. Anderson applies this idea to the affective atmosphere, stating that an expressed world “creates a space of intensity that overflows a represented world organized into subjects and objects... [whereby] through an atmosphere... a represented object will be apprehended and will take on a certain meaning.”¹⁷⁰ By constructing imaginations of sonic cosmologies, these texts are thus able to press new meanings into the representational world of our mundane selves and environments. When they are apprehended, these new correlations and interconnections will overtake our normal sensibilities of them, thereby creating spaces in which affective transformations are possible.

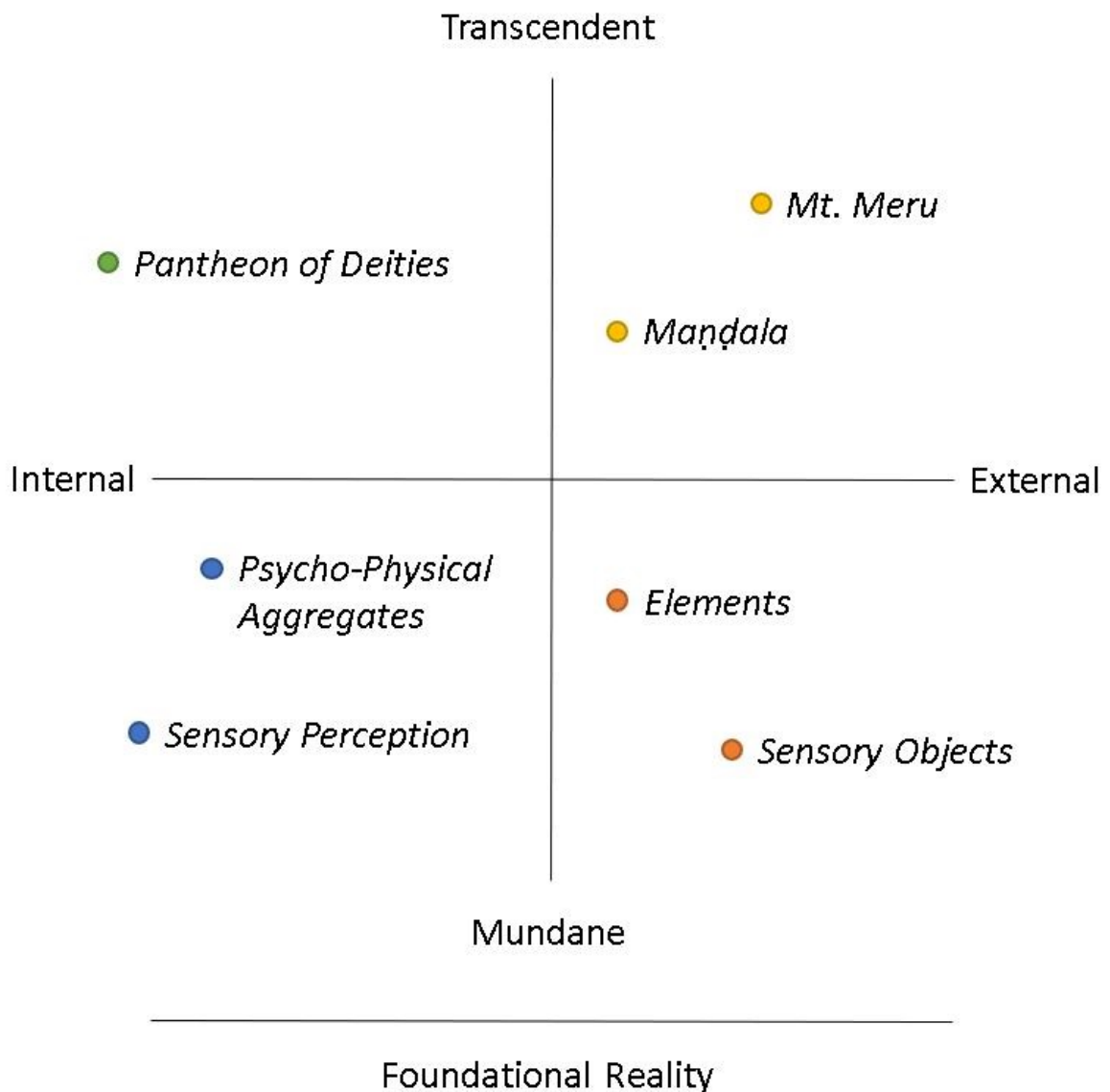
The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* craft such structured imaginations of the mundane world – its environments and inhabitants – using primarily the sounds of the

¹⁶⁸ Gavin Flood, forward to *Tantric Mantras*, André Padoux, ix.

¹⁶⁹ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 79.

alphabet and the elements. These cosmologies will prove foundational for their philosophical and contemplative projects. Throughout this dissertation, we will explore how they develop interconnected visions of the mundane and transcendent worlds through sounds, and how contemplations of listening and recitation mobilize those sounds to enact radical transformation from the mundane to the transcendent.



Overall, the texts chart these imaginations according to the axes of mundane-transcendent and internal-external. Every idea, argument, narrative, or correspondence

they posit fits somewhere on this grid. However, this is not only a map of ideas, but of sounds. Their epistemologies of sound focused on these sounds' functions, tendencies, and capacities towards human forms of knowledge. Their sonic cosmologies, though, are largely made through corresponding sounds with aspects of mundane existence. These correspondent nodes of sonic imagination are grouped and interrelated according to sonic or philosophical organizational systems. The *Secret Matrix* catalogues all the phenomena of the mundane world according to the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. It matches the phonetic organization of letter families with the philosophical systems of aggregates, elements, and so forth creating forty-two distinct nodes that can be plotted on such a gridded map of the world. Likewise, the *Unimpeded Sound* details correspondent relationships between sounds of the elements, alphabet, numbers, and melodies and a variety of traditional Buddhist or novel knowledge systems including the six realms of beings, but also their sixty sensory capacities.

These mundane imaginations are divided into two primary categories: the *external* environments of the world, and the beings who live *internal* to those environments. While these are ways of breaking apart the material world and animate life, objects and subjects, these become interconnected through sound. These connections address Buddhism's critique on the subject-object dualistic illusion of the mundane world and create platforms for sonic contemplations that collapse those divides. Thus, we will find the aggregates interconnect with the elements and sensory perception dissolve into sensory objects. First, though, we will explore the ways these texts are mapping both sides of this mundane sonic imagination: the world and beings.

2.3.1 *The World*

The mundane cosmology is constructed in these texts in terms of three basic rubrics: the elements, sensory objects, and time. Both the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras imagine a material world using traditional Buddhist systems of knowledge, but through the lens of sound. These systems are charted onto both natural soundscapes of elemental sound and linguistic ones of letters and numbers.

2.3.1.1 The Elements

The elements, either in their four-fold or five-fold iterations are central to both sonic cosmologies. In the *Secret Matrix* tantra, the five elements are mapped onto the **Ta** family of the Sanskrit alphabet. This series of letters, along with its retroflex **Ṭa** family counterpart correlated with the five aggregates, is placed at the beginning of discussions of the alphabet in the *Secret Matrix* due to both its ideological importance, and the centrality of the divine figures ascribed to them.¹⁷¹ In the order presented, the letter **Tha** correlates to space, **Ta** to earth, **Da** to fire, **Dha** to water, and **Na** to wind. Each of these are presented with brief descriptions of the element's essential qualities, which mostly align with normative Buddhist conceptions of these as found in the *Abhidharma* literature. Space is all-pervasive and all phenomena are gathered within it, earth is stable, fire ripens, water is pliant and can fit wherever, and wind is light and wavering.

In the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, the elements comprise one of the five descents of sound into the world. Their sounds are the central contemplative practice for this tradition. However, the elements appear in all the other descents of sound as well. In the

¹⁷¹ These are the primary divine consort couplings of the mandala, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

locations of Brahmā sound within the five aggregates of beings, each aggregate is associated with a different elemental body. Viṣṇu’s set of four-fold engagements features the elemental modalities of centralized, diffused, and balanced. The kalapingka’s aesthetic mental contemplations involve listening to the sounds of the elements. And all Buddhas of past, present, and future were awakened in reliance on the sounds of the elements, giving them vocal capacity to affect beings.

The elements and their sounds are further refined in the discussion on their sonic locations. The four elements are broken down into subdivisions, wherein each of the four elements have aspects of all four elements, making sixteen permutations that are assigned 125 sounds each. Elements are further categorized according to their gender and temperature – either feminine-hot or masculine-cold. This gendered line of reasoning also explains the exclusion of space from elemental calculations and practices, given that it is “neuter and empty,” and thus not suitable for inclusion in these gendered calculations. Applying this division to the previous calculation, 1,000 sounds are described coming from each element, totaling 4,000 elemental sounds.

2.3.1.2 Sensory Objects

The sensory materials of the world – visual form, sound, smells, tastes, and touchable things – comprise the second primary node of the external mundane sonic cosmological imagination for both texts. The *Secret Matrix* correlates the **Ca** letter family to these five sensory objects.¹⁷² **Ca** corresponds to visual form, **Cha** to sound, **Ja** to smells, **Jha** to taste, and **Ma** to touchable things. This final letter comes from a different letter family, a

¹⁷² The sensory object of the mind, nor the mind as a sense, is used here in keeping with the five-fold numbering system of the letter families as well as other important ideological systems.

switch that is indicative of the *Secret Matrix*'s special use of the tactile sensory domain for their wrathful gatekeepers in their transcendent pantheon. It is also likely a remnant of the limits of their alphabetical medium, which will be discussed further below.

In the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, the sensory objects are less explicitly defined. However, the five senses are sites of Viṣṇu's sound. The contemplative practices found in that section instruct practitioners to focus on specific objects for all five senses. Their visual forms are colors and shapes, their sounds are from musical instruments made by practitioners themselves, smells waft from incense compounds, and tastes are concocted according to detailed recipes:

Thoroughly mix brown sugar, fresh nutmeg, fresh cowhide, kalati leaf, the fruit of a sanjili plant, and the heart of the tsangka plant. Inside a new clay pot not used for other things, put in grape wine of the same amount [as the other mixture]. You can keep this in a hole. You carefully combine human bone marrow and the fat of a horse with the color of a wild ass. Then carefully seal it inside the same clay pot so no air can fit inside. Leave it in there for the number of days you, the yogi, are old. Then sounds of sir and tsir emerge. Then various small voices of trulbum spirits will emerge. Then those sounds will disappear and at that time you strain it with various beers and leave it for three days.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 125.5-126.2

Pea-sized portions of this rich substance are then placed on one's tongue for full gustatory effect. Likewise, the touchable objects described involve the processes of bathing, dressing in silks, and applying oils, creams, ash, and sandalwood diffusions to different parts of the body. In this way, specific objects of the five senses become codified under the rubric of Viṣṇu's numerical sounds, since these five sensory objects are an enumeration of the mundane world.

2.3.1.3 Time

They also put forth cosmologies of time to address the changing nature of the

phenomenal world. In the *Secret Matrix*, time is presented according to the traditional Buddhist triad of past, present, and future termed “momentary time” by the commentary. While sometimes a fourth “all-time” is added to this group, the commentary presents “future generations” (*phyi 'byung pa*) to complete the quartet. Two more quartets are correlated with these moments. Seasonal time – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter – and cosmological time in which the universe emerges, persists, is destroyed, and lays fallow in emptiness. All three of these temporal modalities are mapped onto the only quartet found in the Sanskrit alphabet: the semi-vowels. Each letter thus has three temporal markers attached to it ascending in chronological order. **Ya** has the initial time periods: the past, Spring, and the emergence of the universe. **Wa** is next with the present moment, Summer, and persistence. **Ra** follows with the future, Autumn, and destruction. Finally, **La** connects to moments of future generations, Winter, and universal emptiness.

The *Unimpeded Sound* shares some seasonal temporal markers in its sonic imagination, but also adds a novel system of elemental calculations. The seasons are a significant part of elemental theory within the *Unimpeded Sound* and its commentary. While they appear only occasionally within the text’s presentation on sonic imagination, the seasons are intricately tied with the elements throughout the text, informing contemplative practices including *Listening to the Elements*. Spring is imagined as the time of earth, summer as the time of fire, autumn as the season of wind, and winter as the period of water. These are the times practitioners should listen to those elemental sounds for greatest efficacy.

Viṣṇu’s numerical sounds in the six realms of beings also implicate elemental time. Here, the seasons are given the functional descriptions of engagement, emergence,

persistence, and reversal, in a quartet structure reminiscent of cosmological time in the *Secret Matrix*. Each of these seasons is divided into three months, which correspond to times of the three higher realms including the gods, titans, and humans. The remaining three realms of animals, tormented spirits, and hell-beings are imagined according to times of the day. The twenty-four-hour day is divided into twelve two-hour periods that correspond to the three elemental modes of centralization, diffusion, and balance across the four elements. The three types of beings are then assigned specific windows of the day such as the period in which water is centralized, or when earth is balanced. All these times are then taken up as opportunities for contemplative practices that address Viṣṇu's sounds which seem to enumerate these temporal distinctions in the first place.

2.3.2 Living Beings

The beings who inhabit this world make up the second half of mundane sonic cosmologies for the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. Beings are imagined according to traditional Buddhist knowledge systems and innovative rubrics that consider beings' individual components, sensory capacities, type of embodiment, emotional afflictions, and physiologies. In these systems, beings are composed of five psycho-physical aggregates and interact with the world through the five or six senses. They are born as one of the six types of beings, a fate closely tied to their emotional proclivities. Regardless of their form though, their bodies are filled with the sounds of letters.

2.3.2.1 Psycho-Physical Aggregates

The five psycho-physical aggregates are the components that make up a being and are used as a primary way to understand an individual. They map out the physical form and mental domains of sensation, discernment, propensities for action, and consciousness.

While they are a Buddhist philosophical tool used to overthrow the myth of the self, they are still systems enmeshed in the mundane world. These processes keep beings in the loop of cyclic existence and must be addressed if one seeks transcendence.

These aggregates are prioritized in the *Secret Matrix*. They correspond to the first family of letters, the retroflex **Ṭa** family. In their model, the aggregate of consciousness is privileged and mapped onto the central letter of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala, **Ṭha**. Consciousness here is described using the eight consciousnesses model of Yogācāra schools – namely the six sensory perceptions, the afflictive consciousness, and the storehouse consciousness. The aggregate of physical form corresponds to **Ṭa** and described as being directly perceived by the senses. Sensation maps onto **Ḍa** and is discussed according to the six sensory modes and the three modes of sensation (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), making eighteen sensations. Discernment is encoded onto **Ḍha**. The propensity for action corresponds to the nasal **Ṇa** and is enumerated with the model of fifty-one mental formations as seen in the *Abhidharma-samuccaya*.

The *Unimpeded Sound* uses the five psycho-physical aggregates as five locations for Brahma’s linguistic sound, also the first mundane imagination of sound discussed within the *Five Descents*. The implication is that the human linguistic tendency to name the parts of the world and the diverse aspects of ourselves led to the crystallization of these five aggregate processes whereby we became stuck as mundane beings. Each aggregate is given a brief description of its nature via a set of limits or parameters (*mtha*’) that generally align with traditional Buddhist definitions of each aggregate. For example, the parameter for physical form is atoms (*brdul*), as all form is made up of these particles according to *Mahāyāna* ontology. The sound “atoms” is then used to attune to Brahmā’s

transcendent sound residing within that aggregate. The other aggregates use nonsense sounds for this purpose, though, possibly as a way to undermine the linguistic forms that created these aggregates in the first place.

2.3.2.2 Sensory Perception

The senses are given sustained philosophical attention in the *Secret Matrix* tantra. Its letter index breaks down the senses according to their three itinerant parts in the sense-spheres: sensory perception, sense organ, and sensory object. The objects of the senses were already discussed as a part of the external world. Perception and sense organ are constituents of beings, though. Mentally, they are equipped with the five sensory perceptions (*rnam shes*): visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile consciousnesses. Physically, they have the five sense organs (*dbang po*) of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. Each group of five is correlated with a different letter family.

Sensory perception is imagined with the **Ka** letter family and is paired with sensory objects (the **Ca** family). Thus, visual perception corresponds to the letter **Ka**, aural perception to **Kha**, olfactory to **Ga**, gustatory to **Gha**, and tactile to **Nga**. Each of these is defined by their ability to apprehend different sensory objects such as form and sound. Mental perception-consciousness that apprehends all mundane phenomena corresponds to **Kṣa**, however it is included at the end of the letter index instead of with the other forms of sensory perception. It is tied closer to the letter **A** in the imagination, as the appearances that arise from the all-ground signified by **A** as its objects.¹⁷³

Sense organs complete the sense spheres for the *Secret Matrix* and are encoded onto

¹⁷³ These are also connected via the consort pair of Samantabhadra (**Kṣa**) and Samantabhadri (**A**) in the transcendent pantheon of the *Secret Matrix* which will be discussed in the next chapter.

the *Pa* letter family. The eyes correspond to *Pa*; the ears to *Pha*; the nose to *Ba*; the tongue to *Bha*; and the body to *Nya* (switched with the nasal of the *Ca* family that correspond to sensory objects). Each of these are also described according to traditional ideas of their essential configuration, such as the visual organ being shaped like a sesame flower, and the aural organ like a twisted ear of corn. The sense organs are also implicated in the sonic physiology of beings for the *Secret Matrix*, an imagination that will be discussed below in terms of the body.

The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra considers the senses as locations of Viṣṇu's sound and applies detailed trainings on them as described above. It further granulates them into sixty sensory capacities that are targeted by the sixty melodious qualities of the teacher's voice. This typology interrelates the senses, whereby each perception has six sensory subtypes including aural vision and gustatory olfaction. The six sense organs and six sensory objects are added to these, in addition to the six sensory trainings of Viṣṇu's sounds and six undescribed sensory essences. All sixty sensory capacities are faulty in the mundane world and require purification through the sound of the teacher's voice.

2.3.2.3 Types of Beings

Beings are grouped into six types in these texts, following traditional Tibetan Buddhist cosmologies: gods, titans, humans, animals, tormented spirits, and hell-beings. In the *Secret Matrix*, these six types of beings are correlated with the six vowels: *I* corresponds to gods, *Ī* to titans, *U* to humans, *Ū* to animals, *E* to tormented spirits, and *Ai* to hell-beings. The *Unimpeded Sound* connects this enumeration of six realms Viṣṇu's numerical sounds. In addition, the sixty sensory capacities of beings described above iterate across all six types of beings. The teacher's voice is described having the capacity to reach all of

them and ignite understanding across their sensory domains in a single melodious word.

2.3.2.4 Afflictive Emotions

The *Secret Matrix* is keen to follow Buddhist emotional cosmologies relating the six afflictions of desire, hatred, ignorance and so forth to the six types of beings. For each vowel that is mapped onto a type of being, that being type's major affliction is encoded into the vowel as well. Thus, *I* corresponds to pride, *Ī* to jealousy, *U* to greed, *Ū* to ignorance, *E* to desire, and *Ai* to anger.

However, in the *Unimpeded Sound*, we are given a five-fold model of the afflictions to match Brahma's locations of sound in the five aggregates instead of according to the six types of beings. Thus, ignorance is related to Brahma's linguistic sound in the aggregate of physical form, pride to his sound in sensation, desire to discernment, jealousy to propensity for action, and anger to consciousness.

2.3.2.5 The Body

The *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* both present tantric physiologies that feature bodies encoded with sound. In the *Secret Matrix*, the foundational and generative letter *A* is located in the navel chakra, from which light radiates to different parts of the body, thus making the rest of the sounds of the alphabet. The consonants follow their physical points of articulation derived from Sanskrit linguistic theory and seen in the letter index, corresponding to different parts of the mouth. The *Ka* family is produced via the throat, the *Ca* family via the flat of the tongue, the retroflex *Ṭa* and dental *Ta* families to the tip of the tongue connecting to the hard palate and teeth respectively, and the *Pa* family to the lips. However, in this photic-sonic model of the body, the light of *A* hits those points of articulation, whereby the sounds of those letters emerge.

The physiological placement of the rest of the letters of the alphabet expands their letter mapping beyond the mouth. The semivowels are placed at joints, possibly to indicate their connective function in language: *Ya* is located at the calves, *Wa* at the waist, *Ra* at the hips, and *La* at shoulders. The sibilants and aspirate lean more into descriptions of the idealized Buddha body, wherein *Śa* is located at the light at the heart center, *Ṣa* is found at the palms of the hands, *Sa* at the hair tuft, *Ha* is at the soles of the feet, and *Kṣa* is at the secret place. Eight of the vowels are related to the sense organs in the body: *I* and *Ī* with the eyes, *U* and *Ū* with the ears. *E* and *Ai* with the teeth. And *O* and *Au* with the two nostrils.

In the *Unimpeded Sound*, 120 of kalapingka's melodic sounds are located within the body. This is mapped according to traditionally tantric physiologies and features four energy hubs at the navel, heart, throat, and crown. The letters of the alphabet reside within the channels of this tantric body. They are activated through physical and verbal contemplations in which practitioners tap locations on their body and recite the letter families of the Sanskrit alphabet. This has the effect of reattuning with the body's natural alphabetical sonorities, thus addressing the aesthetic faults of the mundane body.

Last, elemental physiology is a novel model of the body proposed by the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra. The four elemental constitutions – water, earth, fire, and wind – and their three modalities – centralized, diffused, and balanced – are based on a series of elemental calculations that align one's birth year to the seasonal changes in the present. These typologies reflect the primary element in one's body at a given time and are instrumental to the timing and performance of elemental sonic contemplations. This imagination extends into the Listening to the Elements practice but is also found within contemplative

instructions for training on Brahmā's linguistic sound in the aggregates, Viṣṇu's numerical sound in the types of beings, and kalapingka's melodies in the mind.

2.3.3 Connections

The outer and inner worlds collide for both these texts. Correspondences are made not only between individual sounds and aspects of the mundane world, but also between environments and beings in these sonic cosmologies. The *Secret Matrix* uses its letter index to connect external systems of the elements, sensory material objects, and time, to the psycho-physical aggregates, sensory perceptions, and sensory objects respectively.¹⁷⁴ This is accomplished through aligning typologies of letters across families,¹⁷⁵ whereby the unvoiced-aspirated member of both the *Ṭa* and *Ta* families (*Ṭha* and *Tha*) correspond the aggregate of consciousness with the element of space, a traditional Buddhist connection. Likewise, physical form is connected to earth as they share solidity. Sensation is tied to the element of water, discernment to the fire element, and the propensity for action connects to the wind element, implying that the *karmic* winds that impel us in our actions are mirrored in the external winds of the environment.

The *Unimpeded Sound* is also deeply invested in the connections between the external environments and the internal worlds of beings. However, it systematizes its approach and correlations in significantly different ways. The biggest system of connection for the *Unimpeded Sound* is the elements. The four elements of the material world are described as giving rise to the four elements within beings that inform their elemental constitutions.

¹⁷⁴ This final pairing is less well-defined in the commentary for reasons that deal more with the alphabetical medium the *Secret Matrix* employs and will be discussed in the next section on sound as a medium for inquiry.

¹⁷⁵ The order for the letter families is unvoiced-unaspirated (*Ka*), unvoiced-aspirated (*Kha*), voiced-unaspirated (*Ga*), voiced-aspirated (*Gha*), and nasal (*Nga*).

These connections are most notable in the listening practices to the sounds of the elements. In these, it is vital that one aligns their internal elemental constitution with the external elemental sound in order to accomplish the contemplations. Thus, a person with a predominantly wind constitution should listen to the sound of the wind.

This paradigm also plays out across different sonic systems for the *Unimpeded Sound*. In the contemplations on Brahmā's sounds, each internal aggregate is correlated with an elemental constitution. It even gives granular detail as to the person's elemental modality of centralized, diffused, and balanced, which also determines the specific sounds a person should recite. In attuning one's mental aesthetics with kalapingka's melodies, the practitioner likewise is advised to listen to the sounds of the elements in alignment with their elemental constitution. In these instances, not only are the outer elements shown to connect with one's inner constitution, but to connect with other processes internal to beings. The elemental constitutions inform the ways we approach the five aggregates that make up our sense of being, and the sounds of the elements are used to realign our mental sense that finds beauty in the world.

These environment-being connections are made even more apparent for the *Secret Matrix* between sensory perception and sensory object. The first member of each of the letter families **Ka** and **Ca** corresponds to the visual domain, the second with the aural, third with olfactory, fourth with gustatory, and fifth with tactile. Thus, we find **Kha** and **Cha** connecting aural perception to sounds and so forth. This is also the case for sense organs signified by the **Pa** letter family, which reside in a tension between systems of the senses and other imaginations impinging upon the letter index discussed below.

The senses are also a connective thread for the *Unimpeded Sound*, though less

explicitly, and sometimes even privilege other connections. In the sensory practices within Viṣṇu's sound, the six senses find purchase in the six types of sensory objects. However, the discourse here is not presented as a philosophical reflection about sensory perception, but instead is deeply material in character. It focuses on ways to create the most intense or aesthetically pleasing sounds, smells, tastes and so forth. Sensory spheres of perception and object are also correlated in the presentation of sixty sensory capacities in the explanation of the teacher's voice. However, here, this connection is overshadowed by both interrelations between the different modes of sensory perception themselves, and connections to the six types of living beings. All six are said to possess these sixty capacities and are all united as targets of the sixty melodious qualities of the Buddha which is said to reach all beings of the six realms. Thus, the sixty capacities are multiplied into 360 locations of senses across the six types of beings which can be influenced by the Buddha's voice.

Emotions are the final point of connection for both traditions, though they attach them to different rubrics. The *Secret Matrix* follows traditional Buddhist understandings in which emotional propensities lead to certain types of rebirths as one of the six types of living beings. Anger leads one to be born as a hell-being, desire as a tormented spirit, ignorance as an animal and so forth. These two systems are connected by the *Secret Matrix* under the rubric of vowels, wherein six of the eight added vowels¹⁷⁶ give rise to the six afflictions and their embodiment into beings. The *Unimpeded Sound* also finds correspondence between the afflictions and an internal system. However, it eschews this cosmological emotional set of correspondences and instead ties the five afflictive

¹⁷⁶ Not including the inherent **A**.

emotions¹⁷⁷ to the five psycho-physical aggregates. Thus, physical form leads to ignorance, sensation leads to pride, discernment to desire, propensities for action to jealousy, and consciousness to anger.

Typically, this five-fold set of emotions is used in conjunction with a maṇḍala organization, in which the five Buddha families align with and dispel the five emotional afflictions. These five Buddha families are witnessed in the *Secret Matrix* mandala, for example. However, emotions are not the primary correspondence for that system – instead it is the five aggregates. The fact that the five aggregates and five emotions are intertwined in the *Unimpeded Sound* suggests it is basing this section on a maṇḍala organization. When the correspondences are checked against normative tantric systems, we find this likely to be the case. The fourth and fifth members of the emotional system, desire and jealousy, align with their normative positions in the West and North of the maṇḍala. Pride is often interchangeable with greed in the third position of the South. And ignorance and anger often vie for the positions of first and second, center and East. It is thus revealing that this maṇḍala of Brahmā's sound in the five aggregates features anger and the aggregate of physical form in the center. That emotion typically corresponds to ferocious deities of the Adamantine family, providing new insight into how the *Unimpeded Sound* views its Brahmā maṇḍala.

These cosmological connections serve to dissolve the boundaries of inner and outer, subject and object – a duality that is deeply implicated in Buddhist imaginations of the mundane world's delusion – as well as divest beings of the emotional charges that tether

¹⁷⁷ The emotions can either be enumerated as five or six, depending on the situation. When the six realms are implicated, the six emotions are used. In the context of a five-member maṇḍala, the five emotions are used.

us. This interconnection is catalogued philosophically and across strict organization of letters in the mundane index of the *Secret Matrix*. The *Unimpeded Sound* instead connects subjects and objects through material considerations of elements and senses in ways that are both less defined in according to strict patterns of organization and more concrete in their reliance on the material world around us. Connecting and dissolving these boundaries though sound is further theorized in both texts' transcendent imaginations, and realized via their contemplative designs that mobilize these sounds of connection and lead to embodied dissolutions of subject and object.

Conclusion to Part One

The *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras seek to understand and chart the mundane world according to sound. Throughout Part I, we have heard how both tantras have composed their sonic imaginations of the mundane world. Their presentations, models, and systems have been highly divergent. The former focused on the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet as a generative map of mundane phenomena, oscillating between the delusional affect of sound as language and the revelatory power of sound as vibration. The latter highlighted the materiality of sound across elemental and sensory environments and even throughout their reflections on the language, numbers, and melodic tones we produce.

We have analyzed both texts according to three philosophical moves I argue they are making around sound. They use sound as an ontological touchstone, organizing their imaginations of the mundane world around sonic structures in ways that both constrict and generate new ideas. They make claims about the epistemology of mundane sound as faulty, concealing the truth. And they consider their world according to sonic cosmologies at the human and environmental levels, creating correspondences between phenomena and sound, and connections between beings and the world. The two texts' approaches to these issues at times harmonize with one another, though often separate, forming unique sonic imaginations of the mundane world.

Both texts take up sound and sonic structures as a basis for composing their ontologies of the mundane world. However, sound can present and shape in different ways, providing divergent horizons and affordances. The strict organization of the Sanskrit alphabet proves to be the most challenging and generative limit for the *Secret Matrix*. It thinks of the world in chunks that can be positioned within the numbered

segments of the alphabet. Yet, when it hits the walls of this organization, it finds innovative ways to reconsider its mundane model and meet the needs of the alphabet, its mundane view of the world, and even its transcendent imagination. The *Unimpeded Sound* has different sonic horizons and limitations. While the alphabet is invoked, it is mostly as a cue pointing to the linguistic nature of sounds. Instead, it seeks sonic holism through a five-fold typology that holds up human produced sound in equal measure to the sounds of the natural world. These modes of sound each inform its corresponding mundane systems with ideas of philosophical enumeration, linguistic reification, aesthetic beauty, and the many qualities of the Buddha's voice. Elemental sound pervades all these mundane imaginations, as notions of the material world enter into considerations of living beings' bodies. These connections support the individualization of contemplation for this tradition, while linking external and internal worlds to lead to transcendent states.

The texts also grapple with an epistemology of sound as both concealing and revealing. For each, sound is the source of straying into the mundane world. The *Secret Matrix* argues that language is a fundamental cause of delusion through logical argument and a letter index that implicates every letter of the alphabet in the generation of the mundane world. The *Unimpeded Sound* discloses five sources of sound that include language but go beyond it to theorize about a world the Great Perfection deeply cares about – the natural world. However, all these sources of sound for both texts are shown to be transformative. The letters of the alphabet vibrate through the world in the *Secret Matrix* to forcefully disrupt the erroneous perception that phenomena are anything more than their names, a method reminiscent of Mahāyoga's emphasis on power and violent liberation. The *Unimpeded Sound*, on the other hand, sees all their sources of sound as

already transcendent. Thus, all one has to do is attune to their resonant signatures of awakening through characteristically simple and material contemplations.

Finally, these texts construct cosmological imaginations of the mundane world into two broad divisions: the external environments and the beings who live within. The systems of knowledge used to generate these imaginations rely on a wealth of recognizable early Buddhist, Mahāyāna, and Tibetan Buddhist philosophies and cosmologies as well as innovative ways to approach the world proposed by these texts. They divide up the material world according to the elements of water, earth, fire, wind, and space; the visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensory qualities of material objects; and several dimensions of time ranging from moments to seasons, to eons.

Likewise, beings are categorized according to systems of the type of beings based on the six realms of existence, the afflictions that lead them there, the five psycho-physical aggregates they all possess, their sensory capacity to engage with the world, organizations of their energetic subtle-bodies, and even their elemental constitutions. And while these two larger groups appear as a great divide within mundane existence, these texts reinforce again and again how they are connected: the aggregates to elements, sensory perception and organs to material sensory objects, the realms of beings to time, and the external elements to the internal elemental constitutions. Thus, both texts map out a mundane world that is deeply interconnected across numerous levels of existence, though the specific groupings and connections diverge wildly.

Many of these ideas about mundane existence are prevalent throughout the history of Buddhist thinking. It is for exactly this reason that these authors are able to take such known accounts of the world and remap them according to sound. Both texts take this

wealth of Buddhist knowledge and correspond it in intricate ways to soundscapes important for the ideology and contemplative practices of their relative systems: the sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet and the sounds of the four elements. And while the *Secret Matrix* does this with great precision in their letter index, the *Unimpeded Sound* uses complex and esoteric logic that is only understood by reading between the lines to imagine its mundane world.

I find that these texts are thus productive of sonic imaginations of the mundane world through these three philosophical avenues. They have infused linguistic and material soundscapes with Buddhist understandings of the world. These allow readers and practitioners of these texts to conceptualize and organize Buddhist worlds in new, sonic ways. In doing so, I argue that these texts chart new hermeneutical horizons for engaging with sound and understanding mundane existence. They inform a practitioner engaging in contemplative sonic practices of listening, reciting, and auralizing. Not only will they hear the sounds, but they will be able to interpret and understand them according to the Buddhist ontological, epistemological, and cosmological knowledge systems encoded onto the sounds themselves. Thus, as contemplative practitioners engage with these sounds, they can begin to have embodied experiential understandings of a Buddhist view of the mundane world, a process we will explore in chapter three.

This set of sonic imaginations around the mundane represents the first half of the overall sonic imaginations of these textual traditions. They inform how practitioners understand themselves and the world they exist in according to the sounds they hear. However, as they move through the contemplations in alignment with Tibetan Buddhist teleology of transformation and liberation, another sonic imagination is required to map

out the sounds and Buddhist ideas of where they are going. In the next part, we will recover and interpret the sonic imaginations of transcendence envisioned by both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound*.

Part Two

Sonic Imaginations of Transcendence

Thus, Shave I heard... This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst – its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go. – The Buddha¹⁷⁸

The Umwelt concept [of a living being's environment being delimited by their sensory experience] can feel constrictive because it implies that every creature is trapped within the house of its senses. But to me, the idea is wonderfully expansive. It tells us that all is not as it seems and that everything we experience is but a filtered version of everything that we could experience. It reminds us that there is light in darkness, noise in silence, richness in nothingness. It hints at flickers of the unfamiliar in the familiar, of the extraordinary in the everyday, of magnificence in mundanity. – Ed Yong¹⁷⁹

Introduction

What lays beyond the suffering of our mundane world has always been a pivotal question for Buddhism. However, answers to this question find shifting, innovative, and imaginative ground across traditions and centuries. The Cessation of Suffering is the third noble truth, a core piece of Buddhist doctrine. Yet, the state of Nirvana, “The Transcendence of Suffering” in its Tibetan translation, is often described in Buddhist traditions as “inconceivable” and “ineffable.” However, this does not stop Tibetan religious thinkers from imagining what this state of transcendence is like, how it abides as a fundament to all the material things, sensory experiences, and emotional affects of

¹⁷⁸ Rupert Gethin. *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

¹⁷⁹ Ed Yong. *An Immense World: How animal senses reveal the hidden realms around us*. New York: Random House, 2022, 14-15.

our world, and how it manifests in divine and knowable forms that can impact beings through their awakened bodies, expressions, and primordial forms of knowing.

The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound Tantras* take up this task of imagining transcendence within the Nyingma tantric canon as cornerstones of the Mahāyoga and Great Perfection traditions. Like the ways they conceived of the mundane world, these texts map diverse understandings of transcendence onto their soundscapes of alphabet, elements, and more. Often, the soundscapes remain the same for both imaginations of the mundane world and transcendence. The *Secret Matrix* simultaneously imagines its letter-index according to mundane conceptual systems and transcendent pantheons. Likewise, the five types of sounds in the *Unimpeded Sound* both map out a holistic view of the mundane world and reveal sonic modes transcendence. In these ways, both texts encode a wealth of transcendent and mundane meaning into sounds, which when mobilized in sensory contemplations can be accessed and embodied, creating new pathways for religious affect and transformation in Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁸⁰

Part Two is again divided into two chapters. Chapter 3 will listen to the texts according to their own rhythms and melodic contours. After providing a brief overview of each text's treatment on their sonic imagination of transcendence, we will follow along with the relevant sections of both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras as well as their commentaries. The *Secret Matrix* presents its imagination according to dimensions of sound and awakened bodies, as well as detailed discussions of its letter-index. The *Unimpeded Sound* reflects on the transcendent meanings of its own title before exploring its five descents of sound according to narrative and theory. Finally, it

¹⁸⁰ The mobilization of these imaginations will be discussed in Part Three on sonic contemplations.

touches on the three awakened bodies as essential transcendent components to its main contemplation, *Listening to the Elements*. Like in the previous chapter, this will feature the texts' own words in translation with summary explanations woven through.

In Chapter 4, I will continue to investigate the philosophical moves these texts are making. Following the framework that began in Part I, I argue that both traditions are using sound to as an ontological basis for considering the category of transcendence, developing a sonic epistemology that views sound as revelatory, and constructing a transcendent sonic cosmology that includes a divine pantheon and the foundation of reality.

First, we will consider two underlying sonic discourses that shape the ontologies for both texts' transcendent imaginations. The letter-index of the *Secret Matrix* is an established organizational methodology that serves as a firm framework for both its mundane and transcendent imaginations. Yet, as we witnessed in its mundane index, the *Secret Matrix* creatively bends this linguistic framework to meet its imaginal needs. In this way, we will consider how the alphabetical model limits and provides space for certain forms of innovation in transcendent imagination, while generally staying faithful to traditional tantric categorizations and ways of using sound. The *Unimpeded Sound*, on the other hand, takes up traditional Buddhist discourses around the awakened voice of the Buddha to inform its ontology of transcendence. The Buddha's speech has long been renowned for its capacity to impact all beings with its distinctive sixty qualities and is taken up in this text. We will thus explore the ways such previous discourse of Buddhist sound comes alive in the *Unimpeded Sound* and how it traces the boundaries of transcendence in its own imaginations.

Second, I find that these traditions are attempting to manage an epistemological tension around sound. If sound leads to the deluded misconceptions of the mundane world, how can it also reveal transcendence and knowledge of reality? We will interrogate the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* as they consider this paradox and expand on the capacity of sound within a rubric of the three awakened bodies of Buddhas. These three bodies – the reality body, enjoyment body, and emanational body – are ways that Tibetan Buddhists have traditionally understood the various capacities of awakened beings who simultaneously abide within a foundational reality and appear in resplendent and active embodiments. We will attend to the ways these texts think with this rubric to consider the capacities of sound as it moves between abiding reality and manifest pantheons, revealing and referencing new transcendent understandings and ways of knowing the world.

These two modes of transcendence – foundational reality and its manifest transcendent pantheon – will be the focus of our exploration into the sonic cosmologies these texts construct. While their mundane imaginations mapped the sonic world across exterior environments and interior living beings, their transcendent imaginations instead favor the duo of abiding and appearing. We will thus excavate both categories according to the ways both texts construct them. The *Secret Matrix* continues to use its letter-index to model its imagination of transcendence, finding the letter *A* to resonate with foundational reality and the forty-two letters of the alphabet manifesting as the forty-two deities of the *Secret Matrix* pantheon. In contrast, the *Unimpeded Sound* describes a natural sound of reality that manifests into elemental sound and uses narrative accounts of the acoustic awakenings of its primary named deities – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the King of

Kalapingkas, and the teacher. We will thus consider the ways both texts are sonically reflecting on tantric ideas of foundational reality, describing their awakened identities according to sound, and organizing their pantheons into unified and individualized cosmologies.

Chapter 3: The Sounds of Transcendent Imagination

3.1 The *Secret Matrix*

The *Secret Matrix* tantra cares about establishing their normative tantric rubrics of transcendence according to the fixed Sanskrit alphabetical system. To accomplish this, they approach the subject from several directions. Transcendence is a tantric category that contains a variety of levels. These include the foundation of reality (*kun gzhi*), which subsumes all phenomena of the mundane world and as a site for the manifestation of transcendent beings; a trio of awakened dimensions or bodies (*sku*) that bridge this reality to luminous divine forms and material emanations of Buddhas; a quintet of attributes that holistically describe a transcendent being – their physical forms, verbal communication, mental wisdom, special qualities, and awakened activities; and individualized and named transcendent deities who fill their pantheon in the form of a palace maṇḍala.

These various modalities of transcendence create and recall holistic understandings of what it is to be transcendent, from the very basis of reality to the host of glorious Buddhas that fill temple walls, ritual liturgies, and visualized spaces. Once evoked, the texts mobilize these understandings and imaginations to position sound and the letters of the noble Sanskrit alphabet as embodiments of transcendence, with the capacity to affect listening, and lead them to those very transcendent states themselves.

The *Secret Matrix* and its commentary, *The Sun's Quintessence*, attend to these disparate, though interconnected, understandings of transcendence across their fourth chapters. As described previously, the commentary divides this chapter of the root verse into three sections: an introductory scene, alphabet correspondences, and summary discussion. The creation of the sonic imagination for transcendence plays out especially

in the first two of these sections, which will be the center of our focus.

The introduction is a primary site for discussions of sound as foundational transcendent reality, where it resonates as the letter *A* – itself the basis of all other letters in the alphabet. The introduction also contains reflections on the various dimensions and attributes of an awakened being, addressing the question, what does it mean to be an awakened being in the face of a sonic reality and how does that affect beings?

The primary section of the chapter, however, concerns the letter-index. This features correspondences between the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet in (almost) traditional orderings, understandings of the mundane of the world (described in the previous part of this dissertation), and their relationship to individual transcendent tantric deities who populate the divine palace that is the central maṇḍala and site of contemplative practice for the *Secret Matrix*.

Thus, the texts supply a rich sonic imagination of transcendence for each letter of the alphabet – the *Secret Matrix*'s primary soundscape. Each letter is encoded with a specific deity from the transcendent pantheon, along with their known activities, features, and positions within a network of hierarchical transcendent relationships. In addition, these transcendent deities are suffused with the awakened dimensions and attributes described earlier in the chapter.

Finally, they all arise from the transcendent ground of reality marked by the letter *A*, a process that the texts continually remind us of within their discussions for every letter in the index. In this way, the many facets of transcendence are mapped onto the soundscape of the *Secret Matrix* alongside their mundane counterparts, creating an imagination that can be evoked in the sensory contemplative practices to come.

3.1.1 Introduction to Transcendent Sound

3.1.1.1 The Wheel of Letters

The root text opens with a description of the sounds of the alphabet emerging from the awakened body speech and mind.

In the indestructible space of reality, the manner of which is great equality, without wavering from the meditative absorption of primordial awakening, the so-called Wheel-Garland of Letters all phenomena, in which all phenomena remain as mere names, overflowed from the awakened body, speech, and mind that are indestructible.

The Secret Matrix, 13.5-6



This emergence of the letters is placed within the foundation of reality, fashioned here as an indestructible expanse and equanimity. The sounds arise from this state and from the trio of awakened body speech and mind, without breaking from the reality that all phenomena are primordially awakened. Thus, though they act in, reflect, and can be

correlated with worldly activities and objects, these sounds are in essence already awakened – a theological position that will have implications for the transition or transcendence from one state to the other – from the mundane to the divine.

At this time, the commentary both gives a word-commentary account of this introductory paragraph, and also takes time to expound on the idea of sound as reality and the different aspects involved in this, such as the abode of letters, the sound of letters, and the four qualities of letters: their nature, design, number, and activities.

In the explanation of the introductory scene, the commentary describes the nature of adamantine space/ indestructible reality in terms of the unification of appearance and emptiness, samsara and nirvana, and thus “In the space that is spontaneously accomplished through the meaning of total perfection, unmixed with all phenomena, ‘all phenomena do not waver from the meditative absorption of the primordial buddha.’”¹⁸¹ This understanding leads to and redefines the statement “All phenomena abide merely as names”¹⁸² discussed in the previous chapter. While that is a statement concerning the phenomena of the mundane world, it is also working to build the transcendent framework of the all-ground or adamantine reality into mundane existence. Thus, the ground is shown to be not something separate from the mundane, but rather its basis.

Finally, the commentary completes its recounting of the introductory scene by discussing the statement that this wheel of sounds emerges from awakened body, speech, and mind.

Also, “it is called a wheel garland” means that the continual spoken letters are the mandala of speech and that continual speech itself is the expansion and

¹⁸¹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 324.3-4.

¹⁸² *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 324.6-325.1.

contraction of meditative concentration. The mudra of the body, the mudra of the mind, and the four seed syllables of speech are known to be emerging through spontaneously accomplished self-appearance. “Overflowing from adamantine body, speech, and mind” means that the garland of letters which is the continuity of speech, and the (other) four (from the awakened quintet) of body, mind, qualities, and activities which are inseparable from it and indestructible, overflow as self-appearances for those to be tamed.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 325.6-326.2

From among the trio of awakened attributes, the commentary initially focuses on awakened speech. Here, the text indicates that the maṇḍala of awakened speech is made up of the letters of the alphabet in continuous repetition, which itself is merely “the expansion and contraction of meditative concentration.” Here, rather than just the meditative concentration experienced by a practitioner, the text is using this theme of meditative concentration to describe foundational reality, which is not separate from the Buddha’s meditative concentration.

It then comments on the trio itself, expanded here to become the mudras of the awakened body and mind, and the four seed syllables of awakened speech. The nature of these mudras remains unclear, but the four seed syllables likely refer to the syllables used to summon and harness divinities in contemplative practice: **Ja, Hung, Bam, Ho** which will be taken up in its sonic contemplation discussed in Part Three of this dissertation. These all manifest from foundational reality spontaneously as self-appearances. Likewise, awakened speech, cast as indestructible and inseparable from the rest of the quintet of buddha attributes (qualities and activities making up the remaining two), manifest, or overflow, into appearances which can be perceived by mundane individuals.

3.1.1.2 Dimensions of Sound

3.1.1.2.1 The Abode of Sound

The commentary then introduces several other dimensions of sound before returning to

the root tantra. The first of these is the abode of letters (*yi ge'i gnas*) within the subtle body of the tantric system as discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Of note here is that *A* is located in the navel center and gives rise to all the other letters of the alphabet that also reside in the subtle body. To stress the connection with foundational transcendent reality, the author quotes a passage from the *Namasamgiti*: “*A* is supreme among all letters. It is the great meaning and the sublime letter. It is the unborn that emerges from within”.¹⁸³ *A* is described as the great meaning (*don chen*), which could also be translated as “the great absolute reality”. Its qualities of being ‘unborn’ and ‘sublime’ also are a reference to this connection, as foundational reality shares these traits and is often described with these terms.

3.1.1.2.2 The Sound of Letters

The next section in the commentary on the sound of the letters features this primary letter, *A*, and its connection to foundational transcendent reality. The sound of letters is generally considered in this section to be “unchanging.” This comes in two forms – unchanging sound and unchanging meaning. “Unchanging sound: Sound itself is the unchanging self-appearing letter, **white** *A*. In its unchanging variations, it appears as cut up into the forms of the individual letters.”¹⁸⁴ This section simply offers that all sound, at its most basic level, is a white *A*.¹⁸⁵ And even when it includes variations such as the different vowels and consonants, it remains itself unchanged in its essence.

Unchanging meaning, on the other hand, begins by clearly indicating *A*’s relationship

¹⁸³ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 326.3-4.

¹⁸⁴ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 327.6.

¹⁸⁵ The color of the *A* is taken from the root text and has either cosmogonical or contemplative Indianations, as discussed below.

to transcendence, “The name “*A*” is attached to the letter that shows reality.”¹⁸⁶ The section continues to elaborate on other semantic connotations of letters, such as *Ka*’s connection to action and *Kha*’s connection to pervasion. The rest of the letters are explained using through pointing to conventional religious terms that begin with that letter. So, for instance, *Ka* means action since ka words are about activities: “*Ka* shows activities. “*Ka karuna* is compassion. *Karmana* are enlightened activities. *Ka karuna* is doing. Through compassionate enlightened activities, one does the benefit of beings”.¹⁸⁷ This type of reasoning based upon conventional language use also informs the explanations of the letters. For *A*, however, the author begins their reasoning with an appeal to the meaning of a common mantra starting with the letter *A*, “If you take [the letter *A*] from the [mantric] sound ‘*A* anu sarva dharmā,’ [*A* is used to] signify that all phenomena are naturally pure.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, “*A* only shows non-arisen reality. It does not show the phenomena of activities.”¹⁸⁹ This mantra is commonly spoken at the beginnings of tantric visualization practices and the author uses this fact to tie the letter *A* to the phrase’s meaning and practical uses, denoting and realizing the purity of all things, and thus their transcendence.

This section also makes reference to language in understanding transcendence in two ways. First, it notes that even the words we use to describe transcendence are sounds: “While the Buddha’s primordial gnosis, the meaning of unborn reality, and the enlightened mind are beyond conception and expression, they are realized through letters.

¹⁸⁶ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 328.1.

¹⁸⁷ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 328.3-4.

¹⁸⁸ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 328.2

¹⁸⁹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 328.2-3.

They are made manifestly apparent [in this way].”¹⁹⁰ In this way, letters and sounds are the way that the realities of transcendence come into the world, which in turn supply new transcendent references for those sounds. Additionally, in the discussion on the activity of letters, they are said to be tools of communication, which can serve to communicate at least the ideas of transcendent reality: “As for clearly communicating meaning: letters communicate all the way up to the enlightened bodies and primordial gnosis of thus-gone-ones.”¹⁹¹

Finally, a comment is made about all language. Since it arises from this pristine basis of foundational reality, auralized by *A* and turned into the other letters, all words themselves are of that transcendent nature, even when used to speak of mundane things. The author uses the metaphor of gold to describe this:

Additionally, the sound “suvarna” (Sanskrit for “gold”) signifies illuminating or purifying. For example, gold is primordially free from adulteration by lesser metals. Therefore, superficial illusions and faults of tarnishing on it do not pollute it. Like that, within letters, the meanings of reality and enlightened mind appear unceasingly. This is taught as the meaning of the awakened mind abiding naturally as primordially pure from defects – it is taught as the illumination of suchness.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 329.2-4

Thus, in the same way that gold cannot be tarnished, due to its purifying and illuminating nature, reality appearing in the form of letters cannot be tarnished by the stains of mundane ideation or usage of those letters in conventional discourse. In this way we can witness transcendent reality as the underlying nature of not just the letter *A*, with which it is most closely connected, but of all letters and language, since their basis is *A*.

¹⁹⁰ *The Sun’s Quintessence, 329.1-2.*

¹⁹¹ *The Sun’s Quintessence, 331.5.*

3.1.1.2.3 The Nature of Letters

The commentary then comments on the transcendent nature of letters.

*Nature of letters: letters themselves are free from the extremes of appearance and emptiness from the very beginning. They are the nature of the Buddha. From this very scripture (The Secret Matrix): “A itself diversely appears as the forty-two letters beginning with ka. It contains everything with sounds and names. That very king of perfect manifestation is ascertained.” In Vairocana’s Web of Magical Illusion also it says, “Vajradhara who is born from bliss knows material things and immaterial things both to be the great abode of emergence. Wherever Vairocana (appears) first, he emanates as **Om** with his pure stainless mind.” From the Compendium of Secrets, it also says, “**Om** is the supreme body of the Buddha. **Am**¹⁹² is the path of the Buddha’s speech. **Hung** is the primordial gnosis of his mind.” Therefore, it is the nature of the Buddha.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 329.4-330.2.

This section clearly lays out the nature of letters as transcendent – the Buddha – and free from the extremes of appearance and emptiness, a classically used characterization of the nature of transcendence. It also supplies us with three scriptural examples in which letters are shown to be deeply connected or equated with foundational transcendent reality and transcendent deities. In the first, taken from a different section of the *Secret Matrix*, the letter *A*, already shown to be tied with transcendent reality, manifests as the rest of the alphabet – its sound pervading everything. The second passage is taken from another Mahāyoga completion text in the *Māyājāla* cycle in which the *Secret Matrix* is located. Vajradhara, who is identified as transcendent here by his wisdom over the nature of phenomena and “his pure stainless mind”, appears first as the sound *Om*, another common mantric particle. Finally, we are presented with the trio of *Om*, *Am*, and *Hung*,

¹⁹² This is originally “Am” in the text. I would suggest a correction to *Ā*, as that is a common part of this trio of mantric particles. It was likely replaced with Am in a scribal error. However, without other witnesses to this text, we cannot be certain that it was not intentional.

which are mapped onto body, speech, and mind respectively. This correlation of linguistic items with Buddhist concepts and realities follows normative indexing within mantric recitation and tantric visualization and auralization practice. The point being made – because letters are the Buddha’s awakened body, speech, and mind, they have a transcendent nature.

In addition, the nature of the letter *A* is connected to the awakened mind in a short contemplation in this chapter on the white letter *A*.

The letter A, which is reality, awakened mind, and the essence of self-appearances, does nothing but show reality again. Therefore, meditate on the white A, which is the sign of reality free from all limits, because it is free of the faults of impurity. Additionally, because mind-itself has the power to appear everywhere, as the sign of that, the color white is able to become anything.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 337.3-4.

The letter *A* is again encoded with these ideas of transcendence. *A* is foundation reality – the enlightened mind, free of all limits or impurities. It naturally manifests, but when it does it only reflects reality. These manifestations appear everywhere, as they are what makes up mundane reality. Thus, a color is added to the sound *A*, white, which too has the capacity of total flexibility – it can become anything due to its neutrality.

3.1.1.2.4 The Design of Letters

This transcendent nature is communicated through both the design and activities of the letters, in particular *A*. This section focuses on the visual design of the letters of the alphabet as platforms for envisioning their transcendent qualities.

Design of letters: In Sanskrit, each letter presents many meanings. ... From a certain perspective, it is said that “A, is like the A of a lions yawn.” In this way, for example, if a snow lion’s sound resounds, other beasts such as the tiger will be alarmed and frightened, and then flee. The small wild animals will surely faint

and suffer. The families of lions will majestically grow in happiness and joy. Like that example, because A is explained and shown to have the meaning of unborn, Hearers and Self-realizers will fear and faint. Bodhisattvas on the stages and Awareness holders will generate amazement.

The Sun's Quintessenc, 330.2-6

The commentator begins by referring to the fact that Sanskrit words and letters are notoriously semiotically complex, and he will make use of this feature in his analogy to demonstrate how even their visual design can indicate meaning. The commentary claims that *A*'s design is similar to a lion's yawn, which both terrifies lesser beings and enriches other lions.



Figure 1. Left is the Tibetan letter A, center is the Sanskrit letter A, and right is a yawning lion.

It is unclear exactly how the design of the letter *A* resembles a lion's yawn. Perhaps it is in the round and pointed ends at the bottom which could resemble a tongue and teeth. It could be that flipped ninety degrees, it looks like the nose and open mouth. Or it could be referring to the visual openness of one's mouth as they say the letter *A* that resembles a lion's yawning mouth. Regardless, this metaphor is mapped onto ideas of *A* as foundational reality. Lesser beings, hearers and self-realizers, who are on the lower (and thus worse) paths of Buddhism will be terrified at the sight of *A* because of the reality

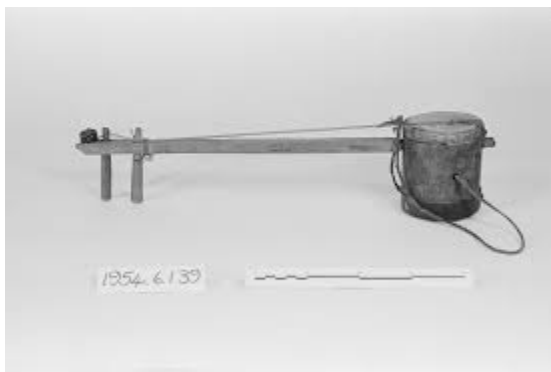
that *A* presents.¹⁹³ However, awakened beings, such as bodhisattvas and awareness holders, who have witnessed this transcendent reality, will grow in their amazement like the lions.

The designs of all the letters can be encoded with transcendent meaning and metaphor, an idea that is made clearer with the imagination on the visual design of the letter *Ka*.

*If you explain for the sound-letter one such as **Ka**, “**Ka** is like the separated tuners of the piwang.” Additionally, for example, the sound of the piwang is beautiful in the mind of the spectator and satisfies their sense of hearing. Like that, performing benefit with activities known to be methods of the thus-gone-ones, (fills) sentient beings’ minds with beauty, (taking them) to transcendent abodes, and satisfies their mind streams with authentic meanings. This is what the shape of **Ka** signifies.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 330.6-3

Again, we see here a continuation of the idea that all the letters, since they arise from transcendent *A*, have transcendent capacities. The shape of *Ka* is likened to the tuners of a piwang lute and are thus central to the sound that the piwang makes.



¹⁹³ This is likely related to Mahāyāna sutras, such as the Prajnaparamita Sutra, in which Hinayana monks, who are not ready for the teachings on emptiness, start vomiting blood when they are given such glimpses into reality by the Buddha. These are part of a larger denigration of the ‘Lesser Vehicle’ Hinayana schools by the ‘Greater Vehicle’ Mahāyāna. For more detail see *The Heart Attack Sutra*, by Karl Brunnhölzl, published by Snow Lion, 2012

*Figure 2. On the left is a Tibetan piwang lute, its tuners on its left side pointing down. On the right is the Tibetan letter **Ka**, which also features vertical lines intersecting a horizontal plane.*

This becomes the basis of analogy for the commentator. The sound of a piwang performance brings beauty and satisfaction to the minds of spectators. This is likened to the performance of beneficial and awakened activities, which bring transcendent beauty to beings' minds and satisfies them deeply with awakened knowledge. In this way, aural transcendent metaphors are also encoded into the visual shape of the letters.

3.1.1.3 The Three Awakened Bodies

The next section of the introduction deploys the trio of awakened bodies of Buddhas – the reality body, enjoyment body, and emanation body – to discuss their relationship with sounds of the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. The section details each individually, beginning with the reality body.

3.1.1.3.1 The Reality Body

*As for the presentation on letters awakening as the reality body, it says “**A**, of emptiness and non-emptiness” and so forth. The letter **A** is beyond the limit of emptiness. The all-ground appears as the letter **A** which is the uninterrupted dynamic play of self-appearance in the space of mind. In its mere appearance, it is beyond material reality. If you take the sonic phrase “**A** anu sarva dharmā”, then all naturally pure phenomena are the letter “**A**”. **A** is naturally pure, unborn, and unique. Therefore, it is both not [limited by philosophical ideals of] emptiness and beyond the limits of materiality.*

The Sun's Quintessence, 341.3-6

Again, we are presented with a discourse on the relationship between **A** and transcendent foundational reality. This uses some of the same terminology we've heard previously, such as naturally pure and unborn, but this discussion delves more deeply into **A**'s relationship with the pair of appearance and emptiness. Following a Madhyamika turn in which appearance and emptiness are two sides of the same coin, while reality

encompasses and transcends both, the commentator places the letter *A* in the position of that foundational reality, “beyond the limit of emptiness.” The commentator does a bit of logical reasoning to arrive at this conclusion. They bring back the statement that foundational reality appears in the form of *A* through this natural process of self-appearance, and because this appearance is only that – an appearance – it is thus beyond the scope of a material reality. This is demonstrated by the mantric phrase used earlier, in which all phenomena are naturally pure as *A*. This leads the commentator to two conclusions: 1) that *A* is not merely empty, since it has appearance, and 2) that because its appearance is not material, *A* is beyond materiality.

The commentary continues:

However, if you ask, does it stay in a place between appearance and emptiness? The [root] text says, “it does not have center or focus.” In the context of focusing on the emanated border of appearance and emptiness, it is free from foci or centers because it does not depend on anything. Therefore, the nature of all phenomena, which is the space of the mind itself free from the boundaries of appearance and emptiness, does not have object or subject. [All] phenomena are equal in measure due to the reason of [them all being] A. Therefore, “they have no focus.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 341.6-342.3

The text comments on the idea that foundational reality is free of any center or focus and without any dependencies, another common way of describing reality.¹⁹⁴ Sonically, this passage argues for the existence of foundational reality as the nature of all phenomena due to their identity as *A*. Since all phenomena arise from the foundational sound of *A*, reality, they are by their nature also *A*. If everything is simply *A*, then there is no difference between objects, subjects, appearance, or emptiness. There is no central or

¹⁹⁴ Check difference in normative Mahayoga/Great Perfection discourse on this.

focal point in this sonic map as the sound of *A* is diffused into everything all at once.

By that reasoning, “All are merely names.” All designations of samsara, nirvana, object, mind, good signs, and bad signs are not established except for in the space of mind. However, while they self-appear through the power of delusion, because they are not established in the ground,¹⁹⁵ they are called “merely names.”

“All Buddhas abide in garland of letters itself.” Therefore, they are realized as the equality of inseparably empty and appearing letters. If this equality is spontaneously accomplished, then all phenomena, the outer and inner things that are signified in that way, are also the perfected awakened Buddha itself. Therefore, like the previous explanation, letters are awakened, and therefore, all phenomena that are signified by letters are also awakened. In the way of sesame seeds and sesame oil, all inner and outer phenomena reside in the essence of the reality body. Because letters are the same as that (essence), inside all letters and phenomena marked by letters, the essence of the Buddha resides.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 342.3-343.2

The second half of the presentation on the reality body continues to describe how all phenomena are related to transcendent foundational reality through sounds. First, phenomena are simply nominal designations that are not truly established anywhere but in our deluded thoughts. This is typically cast as derogatory to the role of sound, in the sense that because beings name phenomena out of delusion, they reify the mundane world of straying. While this passage appears to be taking on some of that discourse, it also valorizes the role of sound in the process of phenomenal manifestation of reality. Awakened Buddhas reside within letters, which embody the union of emptiness and appearance. Because phenomena are mere significations through these letters, they too must be awakened as Buddhas. Thus, sound suffuses both sides of the mundane and

¹⁹⁵ The Tibetan here reads “*gzhi lam grub pas*,” which would mean “because the ground and path are established.” However, this does not fit the meaning of the passage. My reading includes a missing *tseg* break between *la* and *ma* to make “*gzhi la ma grub pas*,” meaning “because they are not established in the ground.” Without additional witnesses to the text, it is impossible to confirm this reading, however.

transcendent divide and marks out a path between them.

The commentary also connects the reality body to the awakened mind, part of the three or five awakened attributes of body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities.

As for the presentation on the letters of the reality body as the awakened mind, it says “the nature of insubstantial letters is the mind.” Letters lack substantial reality. “Insubstantial” then refers to the letter A etc. All of the group of forty(-two) insubstantial letters appear from the space of the mind itself. For example, the ocean is not beyond wetness – therefore even the waves that emanate from that are not beyond wetness. It is the same for letters: through being causally pure, insubstantial mind itself appears as letters. In mere appearances themselves, the nature of letters does not waver from the state of the mind itself and is inseparable from it. Suchness is the reality body.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 346.3-6

This passage equates the nature of mind – termed as foundational reality, the reality body and the enlightened mind – with letters. Letters are depicted as insubstantial, as is the mind from which letters appear. The example demonstrates how this operates – the mind is insubstantial, like the ocean is wet. Therefore, the letters that arise from the mind must too share this essence of insubstantiality, like the waves from the ocean remain wet. Since their nature is the same, the commentator argues that although letters appear in the world, they are inseparable from the mind itself, and thus from transcendent reality.

3.1.1.3.2 The Enjoyment Body

The second awakened body is the Enjoyment body. This is the manifestation of the ground into resplendent Buddha forms:

As for the presentation on awakening into the enjoyment body, “A itself appears variously,” etc. A is the unborn and singular reality that is not limited [by things] like ceasing or dissolving. From the play of ceaseless ground of real meaning that is signified by A, there variously appears the characteristics of thought, the aggregates, body, and sense spheres. A itself, having emerged from the generative site (the navel wheel), appears variously. Through the condition of

*appearing as throat, teeth, and tongue, it says “the forty-two letters beginning with **Ka**”, meaning that **A** appears as the group of forty-two letters with different shapes beginning with **Ka**. When it is purified, **A** itself appears as the ground, Samantabhadri. From this, it appears as the group of forty-two Victors.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 343.2-6

From foundational reality, again seen here sonically as *A*, different aspects of beings begin to appear – their psycho-physical aggregates, senses, and bodies – each having the characteristics of thoughts (*rtog pa*), which is part of the basic trio of sounds, thoughts, and deities introduced here in Part One. However, when there is foundational purity, it appears in the form of the forty-two Buddhas, beginning with the embodiment of foundational reality, Samantabhadri. Here we can see the connection between this trio of sound-concept-deity at play as a process of manifestation. All three arise from foundational reality, signified by the sound *A*. In the context of sounds, they arise as the forty-two letters. These sounds can appear in mundane ways as the forty-two thoughts, and they can appear in transcendent ways as the forty-two deities. This latter manifestation is described here as the enjoyment body.

*“Everything is subsumed by sonic names” means that sound from the **A** appears as the group of forty-two letters, and having appeared, non-realized [ignorance] as well as all phenomena of samsara, are subsumed by the lack of being signified by letters (i.e., they are signified by letters). Realization, as well as the transcendent Victors, are subsumed and not beyond letters. Even all groups of letters that appear from **A** itself are indivisible from **A**, and therefore they are also subsumed.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 343.6-344.2

Within this constellation of sounds, concepts and divinities, everything appears in the context of transcendent sound. The phenomena of the mundane or ignorant world are all signified by letters. The Buddhas, too, are within sound’s domain. Sound thus acts as an underlying presence that encompasses both the mundane and the transcendent. It can

reference all things – a capacity that both texts will take up as they reimagine sounds expressivity to reveal transcendent worlds through transcendent reference.

Therefore, it says “[reality] itself is ascertained as the manifestly perfect Victor.” This is taught as the essence of the enjoyment body. A, which is the letter of the ground, path, and fruition, manifests as the Reality Body free from limits in the state of the inseparability of meaning and sign. It is the complete grouping of primordial gnoses, free from objective fixation. [A] manifests as the Emanation Body through performing any activities whatsoever for the sake of those to be tamed, though without ceasing in its self-appearances. Through this, these inseparable two bodies are the complete enjoyment body. Because it is victorious over the dual limits of both unceasing and unfixating, it is called “Victor.” The greatness of ascertaining suchness does not abide in even the subtle phenomena which is grasped biasedly.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 344.2-5

The section concludes by connecting the enjoyment body with the reality and emanation Bodies in the context of sound. *A* manifests as both the reality body and the emanation body in their respective designations of limitless primordial gnosis and engagement with beings. The combination of these two bodies, manifested from *A*, is the enjoyment body, which contains the capacities of both – it is neither fixated like the reality body, nor is it ceasing in its self-appearance, like the emanation body. It is victorious over those limits, and thus the term “victor” is used to describe deities, who are in the form of the emanation body.

3.1.1.3.3 The Emanational Body

Finally, the discussion of the emanational body describes how awe is inspired through letters in three ways:

The presentation on the letters of the emanation body as awakening from enlightened speech. “Amazing! This wonderful, superb...” and so forth. “Amazing” means that there is awe for [the letters] Ka, Kha and so forth substantially self-appearing, yet unwavering from the space of reality. Discussing

this awe in terms of activities of letters: All the enumerations of inviting the wisdom being, requesting to come, and offering are accomplished by letters and the quartet of pacifying, increasing, magnetizing, and wrathful activities are accomplished by letters – thus there is awe. As for awe in terms of nature: whichever group of letters whose shapes are different appears, because awareness is self-appearing, the nature of the letter is the mind itself – there is awe for this. Therefore, there are three [awes of appearance, activity, and nature].

The Sun's Quintessence, 344.4-345.3

The emanation body is closely tied to the awesomeness of letters, keying off the exaltation in the root verses “Amazing!” It breaks down this wonder into three categories: appearance, activity, and nature. These categories are active in other parts of this commentary, though it is unclear if they are outward references, such as nature corresponding to the reality body, or whether they are all qualities of the emanation body. We know from the previous section on the enjoyment body that self-appearances and activities map onto emanation. It seems likely then that nature refers back to the nature of the emanation body itself, though as we will see, this nature is tied up with the appearance of foundational reality.

The appearance of the letters is described as the letters of the alphabet self-manifesting into material reality while remaining unwavering from their reality as transcendent. This idea is common with Buddhist teachers who are considered emanations – they are both existent in the material world, and we can thus interact with them, but they still reside in foundational reality, giving them access to the primordial wisdom of transcendence. Here, this is done through the sounds of the letters. The letters themselves remain in the transcendence of previous Buddha bodies, however, humans can interact with them, meaning they’ve appeared in material and mundane, reality. The argument is that they are beyond human convention – that they self-emanate from their

existence in foundational reality onto our material world. That is “amazing!”

Their activities have to do with the language used in Mahāyoga ritual practice. These include the liturgy and mantric syllables involved in exhorting the wisdom being to descend and reside within the commitment being that the practitioner visualizes and auralizes initially. The four primary syllables of that process are “**Ja, Hung, Bam, Ho,**” which the commentary will delve further into in later chapters, though those are not the only sounds and syllables used for the process. The language also includes the means for accomplishing the four awakened activities of a Buddha – pacifying, increasing, magnetizing, and dominating. Here we find that the sounds of syllables and words possess ritual efficacy – the ability to accomplish wondrous transcendent things – and thus inspire “awe”.

Third, their nature is the mind-itself – foundational reality. The discussion of nature is brief but uses a logic that hinges on the appearance of both letters and awareness (*rig pa*), another term coded to foundational reality. Because both these appear in the world, their nature (appearing) must be the same. Thus, equating the nature of letters and foundational reality gives rise to awe.

*“The names of the forty-five great emanations:” Because the greater emanation is not produced as anything, appearance or emptiness, it is beyond the limits of appearance and emptiness. In unceasing self-appearing thusness, it is called “great emanation.” “The names of the forty-five:” forty-five is really the forty-two letters as well as the trio of method, wisdom, and space. Names are the words that designate with those [letters]. “Are the abode that grasps words without exception” means that all words are produced through the forty-five names of letters. For example, by combining **Ka** and **Ba** you get kaba (pillar) – it is like this. With those words, all verbal conventions without exception are made to be understood. For example, if you say, “mundane existence,” you understand it as something that has the characteristics of complete torment of a perishable thing. If you say “transcendence,” you understand it as that which is free from mundane existence. It is like that.*

The Sun's Quintessence, 345.3-346.1

The next section of commentary on letters as the emanation body discusses the way in which the forty-five emanations of letters and punctuation both manifest from transcendent reality and subsume mundane existence. The root verses use the term “great emanation” which the commentary uses to justify this close connection to foundational reality. These emanations are beyond the limits of appearance and emptiness. They are “unceasing self-appearing thusness” – in other words, transcendent reality being put on display for beings. The emanations are those of the letters of the alphabet, but here we see an inclusion of three additional pieces of language – the Tibetan punctuation marks of the head letter used at the beginning of sections, the syllable delimiting *tseg*, and the clause delimiting *shad*. The commentary will go into greater detail on these in its section on correspondences, but here we get a preview of their connections to method, wisdom, and space.¹⁹⁶

The names made from those letters pervade all language and enable communication through their expression and understanding. Thus, the communication of the concepts of mundane existence and transcendence are enabled by these great emanations. It is unclear here whether the transcendent nature of these emanational letters is contributing to the specific communication of meanings such as transcendence and mundane existence. However, it does seem to signal that their capacity for communication in a general sense is connected to their status as emanations of foundational reality in some way.

¹⁹⁶ Interestingly, while the *tseg* and *shad* map onto method and wisdom respectively in the succeeding section, the head letter is corresponded with the perfect path as opposed to space. This discrepancy is unresolved, however it is clear that this extra trio mentioned in this section on the emanation body is referring to these three punctuation marks.

As for the activities of letter names it says, “The great meaning and various things are spoken and taught.” Changing the placement of syllables [in this verse, we get], “speaks of various things and teaches the great meaning.” These are its activities. As for various things: from the Buddha’s primordial gnosis, starting with the hawks and wolves of the world and up are signified and made understandable by letters. As for the great meaning: letters manifestly resolve the five omniscient bodies, the five primordial gnoses, and so forth.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 346.1-3

Finally, the commentary returns to the idea of letter emanations in terms of their communicative activities – namely the verbal expression of anything, and the teaching of ‘great meaning’ or transcendent reality. All things of mundane existence and transcendence are communicated through names made up of letters. This is simply a comment on the function of language, though its placement within discourse on letters as the emanation body gives it more transcendent weight. In their activity of teaching great meaning, the importance of this communication is heightened. The meaning of these markers of transcendent reality is made manifest and concrete by these letters. Again, it doesn’t comment on the causality between letters’ status as transcendent emanations and the resolution of these transcendent meanings for listeners, however a relationship between the two seems to be implied given the context.

3.1.1.3.4 Sonically Activated Awakened Body, Speech, and Mind

The activities of the letters are those related to awakened body speech and mind. The first set of these activities relates to the miraculous manifestations of this awakened trio:

As for the actions of letters it says, “the great wheel of awakened body speech and mind of variegated non-fixated suchness” and so forth. “Non-fixated” means that because the group of letters which are the self-appearing mind are free from the limits of appearance and emptiness, there is no fixation. Through the combination of [things] signified by those [letters], even all phenomena of samsara and nirvana – phenomena that are the apprehensions of various characteristics, the unceasing dynamism of self-appearance from the essence [underneath] fixation

which is the equality of the space of mind itself – these phenomena [appear as] the various miraculous emanations of the awakened body, speech, and mind.

[The miraculous manifestations of] the awakened body appear as the mandala with a primary awakened form together with their retinue. However, it is “great” because of the inseparable awareness of Samantabhadra.

[As for the miraculous emanations of speech,] from the essence of awakened speech which is free from all limits, the enumerations of melodic enlightened speech with 360 branches appears like a wheel. However, because the center does not waver from the essence of speech it is “great.”

[Regarding the miraculous emanations of] awakened mind, incalculable details of primordial gnosis appear from self-emergent primordial gnosis in the form of a wheel. However, because they do not waver from self-emergent primordial gnosis, it is “great.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 350.6-351.6

While this passage primarily mentions the impact of sound at the beginning, that impact ripples throughout all three miraculous displays by being both the self-appearances of the mind and the signifiers of the phenomena of mundane existence and transcendence. Thus, these letters appear in all of these various constellations – as the awakened forms within a maṇḍala, the 360 branches of awakened speech, and the specific details of primordial gnosis.

It continues with further descriptions of the trio of awakened body, speech, and mind and their relation to sound:

“The amazing, awakened body speech and mind” means that the unceasing appearance of inseparable letters, concepts, and perfect result is the awakened body. That which communicates self-appearing awareness is awakened speech. Primordial gnosis – the self-emergent awareness of the indivisibility of [body and speech] is awakened mind.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 351.6-352.2

This passage simply reiterates the connection between letters, concepts, and deities that is

at the core of the correspondences index of this chapter. However, we are given new information regarding that, as it is now cast in terms of the awakened body. Awakened speech is further delineated as anything that communicates foundational reality and its dynamic self-appearances. And awakened mind is seen as an awareness of the combination of the letter-concept-deity trio on the side of the body, and (sonic) communication on the side of speech.

The section concludes with a discussion of letters as great emanations:

“Amazing great emanation is extremely attractive” ... refers to letters. As for “The great emanation:” when the ornamental wheel of the five awakened bodies is not realized, although all phenomena of the three realms is pure in its own place, it appears as the essence itself of resultant Buddhahood, thus it is great emanation. Suchness is signified by, and its meaning is resolved by, letters – thus it is extremely attractive.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 352.3-5

Previously, the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, along with the three punctuation marks, were identified as great emanations. This is taken up here to further discuss these emanations, and particularly how attractive they are due to their identity as letters. Letters appear in times where there is not already realization of the Buddha bodies as laid out in this chapter and are thus considered great emanations. They are attractive emanations because they can communicate the meaning of foundational reality.

3.1.2. *The Transcendent Letter Index*

The second major section of the *Secret Matrix* and its commentary detail the index between three major categories discussed throughout the introduction – letters, concepts, and deities. Another way to put this would be as sound, mundane existence, and transcendence. As the previous section described, through not realizing the foundational

reality inherent in the Sanskrit alphabet, there instead appear the concepts of mundane existence (as outlined in the previous chapter of this dissertation). However, when one does realize this sonic foundation to reality, the transcendent deities emerge.

The section divides the alphabet into eight subsections, in each of which it follows a formula to describe these relationships between letters, concepts and deities. The first section is concerned with the trio of punctuation marks,¹⁹⁷ outside the context of the forty-two letters, followed by sections on *A*, and the five letters of the retroflex *Ta* family which correspond to the primary male consort deities of the transcendent maṇḍala for the *Secret Matrix*. This is followed by the fivefold *Ta* family which corresponds to their female counterparts. After this, the bodhisattvas and their consorts are grouped into a larger section that details the *Ka*, *Ca*, and *Pa* letter families as well as the semi-vowels *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La*. The nasals for the *Ka*, *Ca*, and *Pa* letter families and a combination of vowels that make *Om* correlate to the wrathful male gatekeepers of the four directions. The sibilants *Śa*, *Ṣa*, and *Sa*, and aspirate *Ha* then correlate to their wrathful female consorts. The conjunct *Kṣa* becomes Samantabhadra. Finally, the vowels are the sages who appear in the 6 realms to tame beings as forms of the Buddha customized to each realm.

¹⁹⁷ Briefly, the three punctuations, termed “letters of pervasion” here, are the head symbol, the *tseg*, and the *shad*. The head symbol consists of two sequential spirals at the beginning of folios or texts. Its function is simply to mark the beginning of something. The *tseg* is a small dot in the Tibetan script placed between syllables. It is analogous to a space in the English language, though is not used entirely in the same way. Words made up of multiple syllables in Tibetan will have *tsegs* placed between each syllable, and it is up to the reader to know how to parse words. *Shads* are shaped like a vertical club and mark the end of something. Usually this is a phrase, though they can be used more frequently, such as after items in a list. Generally, it separates out phrase-level linguistic units. The discussion on these three punctuation marks in this text relates to the Buddhist concepts of the path, method, and wisdom respectively, which are both attributes of transcendence and ways to realize it. As these are not part of the sonic imagination of the text, but rather leaning into the dual nature of letters as sound and language, I will refrain from elaborating further here.

3.1.2.1 Short Letter-Index

Within the introductory scene, the root tantra recites the list of the forty-two letters, which it and the commentary will later break down into their correspondences. However, the commentary takes this opportunity to list out all the letter correspondences without further explanation, as a road map for the next section. Both transcendent reality and transcendent cosmology are on display in this list. It begins with *A*, which gives us both types of transcendence: “In the context of the ground, *A* is the natural ultimate all-ground. In the context of its perfected essence, it is Samantabhadrī.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, at the level of transcendent reality, *A* is the all-ground, again the Mahāyoga term for foundational reality from which all of existence and transcendence manifests. At the level of transcendent cosmology, *A* is the ultimate female consort from which all things manifest. While this is the only instance of transcendent reality within this brief list, each letter is correlated with a deity within the transcendent pantheon.

Finally, the section concludes with a remark specifying the causation between sounds and deities: “Even when deities are generated, they are generated from those letters. Even when the syllables of awakened speech appear, they are [still] those letters.”¹⁹⁹ In this way, letters are firmly identified as the generative source for both the deities of the transcendent pantheon in the maṇḍala and for the awakened speech of Buddhas.

3.1.2.2 The Letter of the All-Good Buddha

The commentary on the letters themselves begins with *A*. This letter of foundational reality is paired with the transcendent deity, Samantabhadrī, who embodies the space of

¹⁹⁸ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 332.1-2.

¹⁹⁹ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 333.5-6.

reality from which all phenomena of transcendence and mundane existence manifest.

The letters of the All-Good Buddha. “A is Unborn Suchness itself.” From here on is a presentation on the triad of letters, concepts, and their result, deities. As for letters, it is said “A is supreme among all letters. It is unborn, emergent from within.” It is also said that “with the sounds A ānu sarva dharma, all phenomena are purified.” Therefore, A itself is suchness, devoid of elaboration that has no apprehension of birth and death whatsoever. Therefore, because A is not established to be anywhere or go in any direction, all letters appear.

In the context of concepts, the objective sphere of the mind signified by A, which is the nature of all compounded and un-compounded phenomena, is the all-ground of the meaning of authentic purity. Because that emerges without cause, it is devoid of conditions. Thus, it is suchness that has no apprehension of birth and death. Its essence being unestablished anywhere, it manifests without obstacle everywhere, and is all of the forty(-two) conceptions.

As for the totally pure space of reality, it is A; the space of equality without cause or condition, the essence of Samantabhadrī, the very essence of all the buddhas of the three times, and therefore it is naturally and spontaneously established suchness. From the unceasing dynamism of that, all Victors of the ten directions appear. Through those reasons, even if a [deity] is generated during the middle [of the] mandala [generation process], they are generated from that letter. Also, when awakened speech appears as a letter, it appears as that one [namely, A.]

The Sun’s Quintessence, 357.4-358.6

This passage returns to the idea of *A* as foundational reality. However, now it is broken down into the tripartite index schema of letters-concepts-deities. Within the category of letters, *A* is considered the highest and most foundational letter. Within the description of the sound of each forthcoming letter, a physiological explanation is given for its emergence. While that is less the case for *A*, there is still the hint of one. It is called “emergent from within,” signaling that it resounds not from a place in the mouth, such as the other letters, but from a place more fundamental for the production of sound. In common terms, we can think of this as an open sound – when you simply make sound, pushing from your diaphragm, and without manipulating your mouth, lips, vocal cords, or

tongue, the sound of *A* is produced. Thus, it emerges from within. In this way, it is considered the natural and foundational sound within Sanskrit linguistics.

In addition, we find that the mantric formula for the purification of all phenomena returns as an explanation for *A*'s connection to transcendent reality. The phrase, beginning with *A*, is ritually and consistently used within tantric generation and accomplishment practices to bring the practitioner to a sonically induced experiential realization of emptiness at the outset of contemplative practice. In this way, *A* is not only conceptually related to transcendent reality, but takes on that meaning in embodied ways that almost any tantric practitioner within the Mahāyoga tradition would recognize and likely feel. With these attributes, and the identification of *A* as suchness in the root verse, the commentary is confident in its assertion that *A* is unelaborated and doesn't even involve a discrete beginning or end. The reasoning extends to all letters. *A* is able to be the foundation of all letters because it is everywhere all at once, without beginning or ending.

Concepts for each of the letters have already been discussed in Part One of this dissertation. However, the concepts connected with *A* are slightly different than the rest, leaning more to the side of transcendent reality than mundane existence, and thus will be discussed here. As has been described throughout the introduction, all phenomena have the nature of foundational reality due to sound, in several ways. Here, we see that principle play out yet again. *A* signifies the objective sphere of the mind, which in turn is both the nature of all phenomena and foundational purity. Following the move from the previous section, the commentator argues that since it is everywhere and without starting and stopping, it appears everywhere, and specifically as the forty-two conceptions

indexed to the remainder of the letters of the alphabet. In this way, it serves to cast all of those conceptions in the light of foundational reality, rather than as merely delusions. Indeed, through realization of foundational reality, the text claims that those conceptions are purified.

Finally, there is the discussion on transcendent deities in relation to the letter *A*. The letter is indexed to Samantabhadrī, the embodiment of the space of reality, from which all things of transcendence and existence manifest. This is another way to label the foundational reality that has been in play for *A* this entire chapter. As the embodiment of this, Samantabhadrī is both the nature of reality and the unceasing singular source of all the Buddhas, in parallel to *A* being the source of all the letters. In a last comment, the text reads that *A* is the appearance of awakened speech, one of the trio of awakened qualities discussed in the previous section.

3.1.2.3 The Five Male Consorts

The next section continues with this tripartite index and considers the five primary male deities of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala. Akṣobhya is the central deity and is placed first among the grouping, even though his letter, retroflex *Ṭha*, is not first in its group. For the remainder of these letter indexes, I will skip over sections on letters and concepts, as these were discussed in the previous chapter. I will instead focus on any initial commentary that relates to transcendence, but in particular, to the third index for each letter – the transcendent deity.

“Ṭha is Adamantine Magical Emanation itself.” This is the Tathagata Thus Gone One, the appearance of the five primordial gnoses appearing as the five families [of Buddhas] to the face of those to be trained. Due to the five male consorts being the unobstructed method, it is called Magical Emanation. In the Supplement to Magical Emanation, it says, “From the illusory aggregates, self

awareness emanates as the five families through method.” This makes it clear. ...

In the context of the resultant deity, from the dynamism of the unobstructed Samantabhadrī, who is signified by A, the totally pure eight collections of consciousness appear as Akṣobhya. In this mere appearance, the explanations of magically emanated phenomena are complete. “Adamantine”: the totally purified eight collections (of consciousness) are the Adamantine Being, and through self-emergent primordial wisdom, all phenomena are gathered into that itself and one’s essence is unchangeable. Those two are inseparable self-emergent primordial wisdom – the enlightened mind, the Adamantine Family. Primordial wisdom refers to the primordial wisdom of the pure space of reality. As for the generation and seed syllable, the explanation that was given for the letter A is also used for all other letters.

The Sun’s Quintessence 358.6-360.3

To introduce the group of retroflex *Ta*’s, the commentary writes that they appear as the Buddhas of the five families – the primary Buddhas of the tantric maṇḍala – who in turn are the manifestation of the five primordial wisdoms. As the male consorts, they are further connected to method, from the pair of method and wisdom. Here, method is described as having the capacity to transform the deluded experience of ourselves as the five psycho-physical aggregates into the five Buddha families that emerge from self-awareness. These aggregates are the focal point for the conceptions indexed with this letter family, so the purification and transcendence of them into the five primary Buddhas is the central process this section of the letter index undertakes.

The third index for each letter is the transcendent deity. These all begin by grounding this transcendence in foundational sonic reality – thus it says, “from the dynamism of the unobstructed Samantabhadrī, who is signified by A”. Here we have a clear indication of the ways foundational reality is related to the pantheon of transcendent deities. Again, just like all letters of the alphabet arise from A, so too do all deities of the transcendent pantheon arise from Samantabhadrī – these two processes are intimately and continually

linked throughout this section.

The commentary then connects transcendence with mundane existence. When the mundane correlate for retroflex **Ṭha**, the consciousness aggregate with its eight divisions, is purified, it appears as the primary Buddha associated with this letter – Akṣobhya, the central deity in the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala. To comment on this deity’s adamant nature, as named in the root verses, it notes that all phenomena are gathered into the purified mind consciousness and one’s essence becomes unchangeable through the emergence of primordial wisdom. The combination of these two is the awakened mind of the Adamantine family, for whom Akṣobhya is the primary deity.

This pattern continues throughout the other letters of the fivefold retroflex **Ṭa** family. **Ṭa** is Vairocana, **Ḍa** is Ratnasambhava, **Dha** is Amitābha, and **Na** is Amoghasiddhi. Each section comments on how the purification of the concept tied to the letter is embodied by the representative transcendent deity. For example, with Ratnasambhava, the text reads:

“Ḍa is Wish-fulfilling Magical Emanation itself” ... In the context of deities, from the state of Samantabhadrī, the appearance of the all-ground, it emerges as the form of Ratnasambhava who is signified by that. Suchness is “magically emanated,” the meaning of which is explained completely by the fact that it is the aspect of method or the male-consort. It is also called “wish-fulfilling itself.” Thus, the pure ground of the three sensations of pleasure, pain, and neutral, are free from biased grasping, whereby it is the primordial wisdom of equality. Because the qualities of all buddhas without exception appear from that, at the time they appear in their enlightened from it is called “Ratnasambhava,” a sign which is in line with the meaning.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 361.1-362.1

The commentary establishes the connection with foundational reality and Samantabhadrī. It then settles into the main description of the letter and deity – wish-fulfilling. As this letter’s concept revolved around the aggregate of sensation with its

three gradients of painful, pleasurable, and neutral, the transcendence of that in the deity is the “pure ground of the three sensations,” which are “free from biased grasping.” Instead of apprehending any of the three sensations as something desirable or to be avoided, this purity exhibits the primordial wisdom of equality.

Thus, the rest of the primary transcendent deities appear as the purification of the mundane concepts within their corresponding letter’s correlates. Vairocana transcends the form aggregate through his appearance, Amitābha transcends the perception aggregate through the total purity of “unceasing self-luminosity” which “illuminates emptiness and selflessness”; and Amoghasiddhi transcends the aggregate of volition through his complete accomplishment of all activities.

3.1.2.4 The Five Female Consorts

The five female consorts of the primary deities follow in the explanations of the correspondences for the fivefold *Ta* letter family. The root verses describe each of these as a different type of “perfect net,” both a reference to the name of the cycle, *Māyājāla*, the Net of Magical Emanations, and a topic to which each letter-deity index description can point in order to explain the meaning and implications of that index. In the way that “magical emanation” acted as a platform for the transcendent imagination of the male consorts, “net” acts as framework to imagine their female counterparts.

The section begins with a reflection on the nature of the female consorts, their collective role as “nets” in which they bring things together and contain them, and their relationship to the primary male consorts of the maṇḍala. At a conceptual level, that relationship is between the five aggregates that purify into the male deities, and the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space) that purify into the female consorts. At the level

of transcendent reality, they are primarily connected with the space of reality.

Now for the explanation on the five female consorts. Moreover, dhadhatu means space. It is the space of the reality inseparable from the five wisdoms and thus even when it appears as enlightened forms, it is the male and female consorts of the five families abiding inseparably.

The Sun's Quintessence, 364.2-3

This space of reality is intimately tied to primordial wisdom, which we learned from the last section appears as the five primary male consorts. These two are inseparable at the level of transcendent reality, so when they emanate into the transcendent pantheon, their appearances as male and female consorts should be understood as also inseparable, regardless of the perceived separation of bodies. Here, space takes on another meaning for these female consorts. Following a tantric linguistic tradition of euphemizing sexual parts and acts with ritual, aesthetic, and cosmological metaphors, such as the infamous vajra and lotus to refer to the penis and vagina, here, “space” is used in that same way. Throughout the section, and again within sexual contemplative practices later in the text, reference is made to the female consort’s vagina as “space”, within which things happen. Thus, in the description of the first primary female deity, we find that she appears in her transcendent form in the space of the All-Good Samantabhadrī, representative of *A* and foundational reality.

*“Tha is the manifestly perfect net itself.” ... In the context of totally pure deity, in the space of Samantabhadrī, the female consort marked by **A**, the net which is the wisdom marked by **Tha** appears as the female consort Samantabhadrī. Thus, in the state of Samantabhadrī, who is the purified element of space, all phenomena of samsara and nirvana are utterly, completely, and spontaneously accomplished without mixing them together.*

The Sun's Quintessence, 364.6-365.6

This passage is somewhat confusing, given that Samantabhadrī is both the

foundational source Buddha for the maṇḍala and the first female consort, thus we find her name given twice here. However, it also highlights the importance of foundational reality to the maṇḍala. Within this transcendent space there is the “net which is the wisdom marked by *Tha*” from which Samantabhadrī arises in her pantheon form. These letter-deities transcend their conceptual elemental references in ways that relate to their individual element and their identities as “nets.” Samantabhadrī is the purified element of space, and thus within that space, all things of transcendence and mundane existence are “manifestly perfect.” The same is true for the other female consorts:

“Da is the gleaming net itself.” ... In the context of total purity, from the state of Samantabhadrī, the all-ground marked by A, [arises] the goddess marked by Da, the element fire. “Gleaming” means she is luminous and blazing light, acting to illuminate even others. She is the totally pure goddess Mamaki, holder of the wisdom aspect, and inseparable from Ratnasambhava. She is a net – wisdom. Like fire ripens higher and higher in an instant and gathers attention, she fulfills all needs for disciples of the male and female consorts of Ratnasambhava.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 366.4-367.3

The transcendent deity Mamaki, the embodiment of the letter *Da*, is the purified aspect of the element fire, and dubbed “the gleaming net” by the root verse. The commentary takes up these descriptors to discuss her as luminous and blazing – illuminating others. This illumination serves to draw others towards her, in the way that fire draws a crowd, and fulfills their needs, in the way that fire can ripen things. This ripening capacity is also a reference to Abhidharma descriptions of the elements, in which fire ripens, water gathers, earth supports, wind disperses, and space allows for growth.

While some of these elemental descriptors are used here, others are modified, such as earth and its respective deity, Buddha Locana, taking on the meaning of “stability”

instead of supportiveness. The commentary primarily follows the descriptors given in the root verses. Thus, for each of the indices presented in this section are as follows: **Tha**-Samantabhadrī-space allows for manifest perfection, **Ta**-Buddha Locana-earth is stable, **Da**-Mamaki-fire is gleaming, **Dha**-Panadaravasini-water is embracing, and **Na**-Samaya Tara-Wind is totally transforming.

3.1.2.5 Consort Pairs of Inner and Outer Bodhisattvas and Wrathful Deities

The next four sets of transcendent deities, representing the **Ka**, **Ca**, **Pa** and semivowel families, can be divided two ways. The commentary divides them according to their corresponding concepts – the sense perceptions, objects, and organs as well as time. The first three of these are imagined according to the three awakened attributes of body, speech, and mind. However, they are also imagined according to their consort pairs from the transcendent pantheon. In this second model, the three nasal members of the **Ka**, **Ca**, and **Pa** families join a combination of vowels making **Om** to become the four wrathful gatekeepers. They are joined by the three sibilants and aspirate Ha, who take on the forms of the wrathful female gatekeepers.

3.1.2.5.1 According to the Three Attributes

Each of the first three of these are considered one part of the awakened trio of body, speech, and mind. The **Ka** family is awakened mind, the **Ca** family awakened body, and the **Pa** family awakened speech. These descriptions come from the root verses. The commentary connects the three aspects of the senses – perception, object, and organ – to these three awakened aspects of transcendent deities. In the introduction to the **Ka** family, the commentary writes:

Why do we talk about “awakened mind” in the context of perception? Perception

is awareness of the attributes of objects through the gateways of the five sensory perceptions and that (perception) is intimately connected with the mind which directly follows it. Therefore, because the mind in its basic purity is “awakened mind,” both mind and perception are completely transformed.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 369.3-5

The transcendent mind and the mundane mind are tied together here at the foundational level of purity or reality. Because the mundane mind is also a central component for sensory perception, it too is completely transformed into its transcendent form, which is the deities of the **Ka** family.

The awakened body’s connection to the **Ca** family and sensory objects is similar.

*In the context of object, [the **Ca** family] is discussed as awakened body. From the Vajra Illusion it says “Through the four perceptions, one is made to see and otherwise [hear, smell, and taste] the object of focus. Because it is that on which one should focus, it is the supreme awakened body.” Thus, as for the discussion of **Ca** as awakened body in the context of object, perception arises by relying on objects. If there is no [conceptual] object, there is no impediment for the [transcendent] names of the perceptions [embodied as deities] to arise. Thus, it is called “awakened body.” Also, because it is focused and relied upon it is called “awakened body.”*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 372.2-4

Here, we find the awakened body described as the supreme object of focus. While it does not elaborate fully on this, it is reasonable to assume this relates to tantric visualization practices that focus on the form of transcendent deities, such as the one in the *Secret Matrix*. In those contexts, focusing on deities’ bodies is central to the contemplation’s efficacy and the types of results that arise, including supreme results of awakening. This is thus likened to sensory objects of any type, which are also focused on by sensory perception.

The final awakened type is awakened speech, which is indexed with the **pa** family and sensory organs.

*“Pa is the supreme awakened speech of the awakened eye.” As for the senses, they are explained as awakened speech: There is communication in the meeting of sensory perception and sensory object. This communication occurs in reliance on the sense organs, which serve to illuminate things. And because all verbal expressions [also] communicate, [the sense organs] are related to awakened speech. In the context of sound, **Paramartha** signifies supreme meaning. Thus, there are bodhisattvas signified by those [**Pa** letters]. Also, although sense organs illuminate sensory objects and sense perceptions, they are free of materiality and conceptuality and thus signify the supreme meaning.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 374.5-375.2

The first explanation for why the pa family and its deities are related to awakened speech is via the function of communication. The sense organs, the conceptual manifestation within the pa family index, act as mediums for the pair of sensory perceptions and sensory objects. They connect the two together – bridging the gap between materiality of sensory objects and cognition of sensory perceptions. In this way they are communicators between the two. The commentator pairs this easily with the verbal expressions of awakened speech, finding them natural corollaries.

The second explanation revolves around the Sanskrit word, *paramartha* – supreme meaning. Here, I have bolded the first letter of the word, as this **Pa** is the focal point of the explanation. The commentator thus linguistically connects the pa family with “supreme meaning” and offers that as a cause for the existence of the awakened bodhisattvas of this section – those signified by the letters of the pa family. It is also connected with supreme meaning in its place in-between materiality and conceptuality. In this tradition, as witnessed in texts like the Abidharmakosha, the sense organs do not map on entirely to the body parts we might expect – it is not the ears or eyes themselves that are under discussion, but rather a particular sensory material with its own shape and placement. While these sense organs illuminate the sensory world in both its material

objective sphere and its cognitive perceptual sphere, it is neither. Thus, the commentary argues for their connection to the supreme meaning of transcendent reality in that “they are free of materiality and conceptuality.”

3.1.2.5.2 According to Consort Pairs

Another way to parse these sections is into two male and female consort pairs of bodhisattvas, dubbed outer and inner (though these classifications are somewhat vague). Both pairs feature aspects of the inner world of beings and the outer material world, so this is not the direct significance of the division into inner and outer. It could also be simply related to level of efficacy and importance within the maṇḍala, following the tripartite classification of outer, inner, and secret, where the further in one goes, the greater power, blessings, and realization they will find. Regardless, all these transcendent deities are connected to the alphabet and found within the peaceful maṇḍala of the *Secret Matrix* contemplative practices later in the text.

The description of these deities also follows the same pattern as before, with the letter discussed first, followed by the conception, and finally the transcendence of that in the form of a maṇḍala deity. The ka family is comprised of the male inner-bodhisattva consorts:

“Ka is the supreme awakened mind of the [awakened] eye.” ... When it is totally purified, [Ka] appears as the awakened visual perception from the unceasing space of Kuntuzangmo, the all-ground, and thus is called “the awakened eye.” At this time of total purity, “the awakened mind” indicates that it is the nature of the awakened mind of the Lord Vairocana. As a bodhisattva, it is Kṣitigarbha. “Supreme” means that due to the self-appearances of the dynamism of the Bliss-Gone-One’s primordial wisdom, a practitioner infuses their activities [with it]. Thus, it is supreme.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 369.2-370.2

Here we find the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha enter in the transcendent maṇḍala. He is connected with the Buddha Vairocana, the primary male-consort deity, as they both represent the transcendent deity of the first letter of their respective families (even though Akṣobhya and *Ṭha* were placed out of order to begin that letter family's explanation).

Likewise, the remaining letter-deity pairs are as follows: *Kha* transcends aural perception to appear as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara from the awakened mind of Ratnasambhava; *Ga* transcends olfactory perception, appearing as the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha from the awakened mind of Amitābha; and *Gha* transcends gustatory perception to appear as the bodhisattva Vajrapani from the awakened mind of Amoghasiddhi. Finally, *Nga* transcends tactile perception and appears as the wrathful bodhisattva Yamantaka who destabilizes the other four bodhisattvas and their transcendence of mundane sensory perception. Yamantaka and the awakened beings from the other nasal letters are included in a separate consort pairing of wrathful gatekeepers which will be discussed below.

The *Ca* family that transcended sensory objects is the consort pair to the *Ka* family, and its deities are female goddesses. The pattern remains very similar – the normal order of Sanskrit letters – *Ca*, *Cha*, *Ja*, *Jha*, and *Nya* – correspond to the transcendence of the five sensory objects – visual form, sound, smells, tastes, and tactile objects – which are in turn embodied as the five bodhisattva consorts that align with their respective male bodhisattva consorts and Buddha families – Lasyema, Mala, Girtima, and Nirtima. The fifth member of this group, though, is not a goddess, but the wrathful Mahaloka, included in the quartet of male gatekeepers. When the sensory objects are purified and the letters become these transcendent deities, all sensory objects too are experienced as goddesses.

Thus, the commentary reads, “When [*Jha*] is totally purified, the entire realm of flavor is inseparable appearance and emptiness, the essence of the awakened form of Amoghasiddhi, appearing as the goddess, Bodhisattva Nirtima.”²⁰⁰

The second consort pair is the outer bodhisattvas of the *Pa* family and the semi-vowels *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La*. The *Pa* family appears as the transcendent forms of Maitreya, Nirvirana-Vishkambin, Samantabhadra, Manjusri, and the wrathful Hayagriva. These are paired with the four sense goddesses of the transcendent semi-vowels: Incense Goddess, Flower Goddess, Butter Lamp Goddess, and Scented Water Goddess. For each of these deities, the commentary notes that the temporal conceptions tied to each, the trios of cosmological, seasonal, and momentary times, are not abandoned, but rather purified, appearing as the transcendent form of their respective Goddesses. The nasal deity, Hayagriva, again corresponds to the quartet of wrathful male gatekeepers.

The fourth wrathful deity comes from the sounds *O* and *Au* combined into *Oṃ*. It too is discussed using the tactile sensory field. However, it is placed with the vowels in the index. As we will discover in the maṇḍala placement in Part Three, the three nasals of *Nga*, *Nya*, and *Ma* are placed at the eastern, southern, and western gates respectively, fulfilling the role of wrathful deities as gatekeepers. Likewise, *O* and *Au* are placed at the northern gate, cementing its role as a wrathful deity and part of this quartet. The commentary finally pairs the wrathful female gatekeepers – Angkusha the Iron Hook Lady, Pasa the Noose Lady, the Iron Chain Lady, and the Bell Lady – who correspond to the sibilants *Śa*, *Ṣa*, *Sa* and aspirate *Ha*, with these four wrathful gatekeepers.

²⁰⁰ *The Sun's Quintessence*. 373.6-374.1.

3.1.2.6 The Vocalic Tamers of Beings

The final group of transcendent deities are indexed to six of the vowels – these beings are the sages that the Buddha emanates in the six realms of beings in order to tame them with corresponding forms – i.e., to teach them and free them from their individual types of suffering. These sages have somewhat indistinct names, such as Capacity of the Gods, Lord of the Animals, and Conqueror of Tormented-Spirits, each molded from the realm in which they teach. The commentary’s further description of each sage is also limited. The most robust discussion of them occurs for the first index entry on the letter I and the sage of the Gods’ Realm:

“I is Gods as numerous as dust” ... In the realization of the total purity of [the letter I], the teacher who tames the world of gods signified by I appears as Capacity of the Gods and is marked by the signs of a buddha. As for “numerous as dust,” through the force of there being no limits to the realms of the world, the six types of beings including gods and so forth abide endlessly in the ten directions. Thus, [the number of] gods are incalculable and unimaginable and are referred to as being as “numerous as dust.” The Tamers of those are also incalculable. “Numerous as dust” has the same meaning for all the six [realms].

The Sun’s Quintessence, 386.1-5

Here we are told that these sages bear the Buddha markings, likely the major and minor marks of a Buddha such as the *uṣṇīṣa* protrusion on their head and wheels on their feet. The other indication we are given here is that these tamers or sages are as “numerous as dust.” To serve an incalculable number of beings in each realm, there have to be an inconceivable force of teachers. This is not expanded upon, and within the maṇḍala, these are considered as singular individuals. However, this description does provide a certain nuance to how this form of transcendence appears in the world.

The final vowels – *O*, *Au*, and their union, *Om* are separated out and discussed in terms of wrathful transcendence, as mentioned previously. These lead down a wrathful

path of destruction until being realized as their transcendent deity:

“O destroys everything.” The completion of the sixteen aspects of spontaneously arisen primordial wisdom is the essence of touch consciousness – the awakened mind that comprises the three realms of the secret marked by O. In a single instant of that completion, the potency of everything grasped by consciousness including eighteen (sense) spheres, the four views such as externalism and so forth, is diminished and thus it says, “[O] destroys everything.”

“Au is the destruction of everything.” When that experience [of O] is spontaneously accomplished, even the conception of grasping at desire passes. It is beyond expression itself, and in this, everything is destroyed. Ultimately, the wrong views of the three realms and the conceptions that are spread by those on the path are subtly purified and self-emergent wisdom is spontaneously accomplished.

In this itself, joining and receiving O and Au are made manifest. Ultimately, this is the five-fold Om̐, the essence of the five primordial gnoses, whose ultimate name is Wrathful Amrita Kundali, the gatekeeper of the northern direction.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 387.6-388.5

In the joining of these final vowels, we are presented with a wrathful quasi-narrative in which the power that the phenomena of the senses and mistaken philosophical views of the world have on us is dismantled by a view of transcendent reality that is somehow (though vaguely) connected with the sense of touch, (which throughout this index has been correlated with wrathful transcendent deities) and which is signified by the letter **O**. In this way, sound destroys all conceptions of the world.

Once that experience is accomplished, **Au** marks the destruction of everything, in which “even the conception of grasping at desire passes.” When these two destructions are joined, we get **Om̐**, which is equated with transcendent reality in its five-part form of primordial wisdom. When it enters into the transcendent maṇḍala, it is known as the Wrathful Amrita Kundali, the fourth gatekeeper of the maṇḍala.

3.2 The *Unimpeded Sound*

The imagination of transcendence in the *Unimpeded Sound* shares certain general concerns with the *Secret Matrix*. It aims to provide a holistic account of the nature, manifestation, activities, and impact of transcendence, and to encode those understandings onto its own soundscape, dominated by the sounds of the elements of the natural world. It details the ground of transcendent reality, describing its resonance as “reality’s natural sound.” This sonic basis to existence has implications for the ways that transcendence unfolds in the world. In particular, this is witnessed as a natural process of materialization whereby the sounds of the elements ring out the sound of reality and resonate with beings’ bodies also born of an elemental and sonic reality.

Like the *Secret Matrix*, the dimensions and attributes of awakened beings are infused with sound, though with awakened speech becoming a more central touchstone with which they sonically imagine the capacities of transcendent beings. However, instead of more traditional Buddhist tantric deities filling the precise locations of a maṇḍala, the *Unimpeded Sound* follows the reverberations of reality’s natural sound as it awakens Hindu deities and mythical birds, narratively enlisting them for Buddhist action.²⁰¹ Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the King of the kalapingka birds join the Buddhas of the three times and the natural sounds of the elements to form the central transcendent sonic organization for the text – the five descents of transcendent sound into the world. As we witnessed in the previous chapters, these five sources of sound establish mundane concepts of living

²⁰¹ This itself is a classic tantric move – subjugating non-Buddhist deities and enlisting them into Buddhist activities. While some of the members of the *Secret Matrix* transcendent pantheon may also have such conversion narrative pasts, they are presented as standardized members of a tantric mandala rather than as conscripted outsiders. On the contrary, the *Unimpeded Sound* takes very well-known Hindu deities, for example, and converts them to Buddhist activities and awakening in the sonic imagination of this text, giving it a different character.

beings and their environments. However, they are also theorized according to their transcendent properties, four of them cemented as authentic awakened beings, which all possess the capacity to liberate practitioners through merely attuning to their sounds.

In this way, the sonic imagination of transcendence in the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra plays out in three primary sections: the introduction, the discussion of the *Five Descents of Sound*, and through theorizations of awakened bodies in the *Listening to the Elements* practice. In certain ways, because this text integrates contemplative practices and their concordant experiences with their construction of their sonic imaginations, it is more difficult to parse between imagination, design and experience. In this section, I will focus on the places in each of these sections that highlight transcendence as a category, either in its forms of transcendent reality or transcendent pantheon. Sometimes these will be more sustained reflections on transcendence itself, similar to what we have read in the *Secret Matrix* tantra. However, these discussions will also take the form of snippets extracted from commentary on the experiences gained from contemplative practice, at times serving dual roles as insights into Buddhist experience and subtle encoders of the imagination of transcendence onto soundscapes.

3.2.1 *The Introduction*

The commentary features two types of introductions to this text: the commentator's own introduction and commentary on the root tantra's narrative introduction. The former centers on the title of the tantra, the *Unimpeded Sound*, as a site on which to introduce and reflect on some of the core ideas, imaginations, and contemplative practices found within the broader text. The latter comments on the narrative introduction (*gleng gzhi*) found within the root tantra. Both contain vivid descriptions of the ways sound is

connected to transcendence, setting the audience up for the imaginations and contemplative practices of the five descents and *Listening to the Elements*.

3.2.1.1 Commentator's Introduction – The Title

The *Introduction on the Title* is divided into three sections that describe how sound, and the sound of the title in particular, give way to levels of transcendence.

There are three [presentations] on the title of the tantra.

1) The presentation on the sound of the tantra's title as the emergence of all phenomena of appearance and resonance (sights and sounds) as the self-sound of reality in reliance on the great experiential precepts.

2) The presentation on the meaning of the tantra's title as the direct experience of self-awareness in reliance on the experiential precepts of directly experiencing reality.

3) The presentation on the symbolism of the tantra's title as the emergence of all appearances and designations into experience in reliance on the words only.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 7.4-8.1

Even within these headings, we can see the connection between sound and transcendence. The self-sound of reality, the term most often used in this text to signify transcendent reality, and which indicates the sonic nature of that reality, is witnessed here to emerge as the sensory material of the world. Notably here, where other Buddhist literature might only refer to appearing phenomena, a term (*snang ba*) that has an inherent visual bias, though is most often used to refer to appearance in a much wider sensory field, here we find “resonance” (*grags pa*) paired with it. This is a specifically sonic term, and points to the care this text is placing on the aural world as a primary site of philosophy and imagination. In addition, we find the sounds of the title point to direct experience of transcendent reality, which will be based on the nature of that reality as well as contemplative paths based on sound. Finally, each syllable of the title is explained

according to its symbolic value, often in connection with transcendent reality.

3.2.1.1.1 The Sound of the Title

The first section discusses sound in three parts: its essence, etymology, and divisions. The essence and etymology are common sense descriptions of sound and its function in communication. Thus, “Sound’s essence is the function to make the meaning or object of expression known unmistakably through expressing it”²⁰² and its etymology refers to its connections with these “meanings or objects.”²⁰³ This simply means that sound points to, and makes knowable, referential objects and the meanings of ideas and so forth. While this is a basic definition of sound’s function, it is broad enough to encapsulate the transcendent nature of sound and sonic imagination we will find throughout the text. Sounds making meaning known can point to its capacity as a medium leading to transcendent objects and meanings.

Its divisions are two-fold, abiding sound and expressed sounds. Abiding sounds is concerned with transcendent reality primarily. It abides in both the natural channels and in reality. The natural channels are described according to tantric physiology of light, letters internal to that body, and as the basis for the three awakened bodies:

Abiding in the natural channels: Abiding in the form of light, (sound) shows the defining characteristics of the mind. Abiding in the form of letters, it illustrates the foundation of expression. Abiding in the form of the All-Good Buddha consort pair, it illustrates the foundation of the three enlightened bodies. Abiding in these three ways, it vibrates and there is so-called “emptiness through vibration.”

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 8.3-5

Thus, sound abiding within the channels of the tantric body serve as a basis for

²⁰² *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 8.2.*

²⁰³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 8.2.*

transcendent reality. Sound shows the central attributes of mind, whose nature is akin to transcendent reality in the Great Perfection, as well as the basis for the expression of all things. It also resides as the transcendent deities Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī in union, which shows the three awakened bodies – the tripartite expression of transcendent reality. Finally, sound is said to vibrate within these places in the tantric body. This vibration leads to emptiness, which is deemed an integral aspect of transcendent reality.

Reality is pure vibrational emptiness – the pure natural abode of that to be expressed.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 8.5-6

In this second, brief, section on sound abiding as reality, we find again this idea of “vibrational emptiness.” It is both empty and filled with sonic potential, as it is the called the source of all expression, which will manifest out from this transcendent reality.

The other division of sound is as expressed sounds. This also has two subdivisions: Sounds that show elemental signs and sounds that show the identity of words.

As for showing elemental signs: training in reliance on the four elements’ own sounds will plant the seed of the three awakened bodies. Engaging [these sounds] in reliance on the seasonal sounds and meanings will show the activities of the six types of beings and their specifics. By training on this duo [of sounds related to activities and their specifics], one will know [the sounds and meanings of migrating beings], and through knowing, they will realize [the seed of the three awakened bodies].

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 8.6-9.2

The expression of sound that abides as transcendent reality in the sounds of the elements present a connection between these elemental sounds and the three awakened bodies, a theme that will be explored in greater detail in later sections. It also sketches out the process by which one contemplatively plants the seeds of those bodies unfolding –

through listening to each element in their respective seasons, which will provide knowledge of mundane worlds, and experiential realization of the three awakened bodies of transcendent reality.

Expressed sound also shows the identity of words, which in this case revolve around the words of the title, and their connections to transcendent reality. In the next section, each syllable of the title's Sanskrit version²⁰⁴ is explained one-by-one according to the foundation of transcendent reality and its manifestation as appearances and the three awakened bodies.

As for showing the identity of words: The sphere of sound resolves phenomena and reality. Evidence resolves self and other. Other-exclusion, apoha, resolves external matter and mind. Beneficial conditions improve intellect and knowledge. Therefore, here, the specific key points of sound and meanings, the transforming of the letters (of the title into their transcendent meaning) is explained.

Sva, because the abiding mind itself simply arises from the ground.

²⁰⁴ Curiously, these syllables do not entirely match the most sensible Sanskrit name of the tantra, given as *Ratnakara Shabda Mahaprasanga Tantra Nama*, which literally translates the syllables in the Tibetan, but rather follow different versions found in the *gting skyes* and *Sphiti* editions of the text, *svaba tadhatra mahā radnakara tantra nama* and *svaba ta 'dre ta maha radnakara tantra nama* respectively. Most striking here the difference in several syllables. *Shabda*, Sanskrit for sound, is replaced with *svabata*, which itself does not appear to have a meaning, or at best can be rendered as "sleeping." Breaking it down into the three syllables, *sva*, *pa* and *da*, one can hear how putting *pa* and *da* together can produce the compound consonant final syllable, and how *sva* is phonetically similar to *sha*. However, *sva* carries greater ideological weight within a tantric context, as it is often how mantras end "*sva ha*," and is used to signal own's own nature, *svabhaava*, a code word for transcendent reality. However, we also are missing the entire word "*prasanga*" which is Sanskrit for "Unimpeded," a centrally important word in the text's title. Instead, we find "*dretra*," which itself does not appear to have a specific meaning, especially as *dre* (*'dre*) appears to be a Tibetan word, given its prefix letter a chung, which we would not expect to find in a Tibetan transliteration of a Sanskrit word. The Tibetan word *dre* means ghost or spirit, though it would be a stretch to imagine their inclusion of this word without better cause. One explanation for this could be the simple fact that the *Unimpeded Sound* is a Tibetan text, though it is given a Indian heritage. Thus, this Sanskrit name would actually be a rendering of the Tibetan title, not the other way around. In addition to a lack of clear meaning and relevance in the divergent titles, another support to this conclusion is that we don't find any variation in the Tibetan title, just the Sanskrit title, possibly indicating that several different redactors of the text had their own Sanskrit translations. And the inclusion of *sva*, a syllable with an impressive Indian tantric pedigree, might also indicate that it was used as a virtue signal, rather than a precise rendering of the Tibetan *sgra*, sound.

Pa, because one is not aware of suchness due to its unceasing mode of appearances within spontaneous perfection.

Da, because one naturally inquires through abiding in the sameness of the three times.

'Dre, because of the ceaseless arising of expressive power and dynamic qualities.

Tra, because additionally through natural inquiry, the emergent force ('char byed) causes manifold emergence.

Ma, because this (emergent force) is unwavering from the ground.

Ha, because that ground is empty from the beginning, without even recognizing [it].

Rat, because although it arises as various (sensory) experiences, it has no nature as a mental projection.

Na, because furthermore it abides in the mandala of the three awakened bodies.

Ka, because the three awakened bodies are perfected in oneself.

Ri, because there is the light that causes the three awakened bodies to emerge in oneself.

Tantra, because at all times the emergent force of the essence of the four lamps causes it to emerge in the body.

Na, because that body also is naturally exhausted of impurities.

Ma, because although it is a body, it has the key point of being liberated into the ground.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp 9.4-10.3

We are told at the outset that the “sphere of sound resolves phenomena and reality” and are shown through each of the syllables of the title how each of these sounds contributes to our understanding and realization of transcendent reality and the nature of phenomena that appear from it. The commentary touches on a couple of linguistically based philosophical methods and systems, such as the use of evidential-proofs and the Indian Buddhist system of *apoha*, which shows the nature of phenomena through a

linguistic process of exclusion. These are given as examples of the philosophical power of sound to resolve phenomena and reality. This gives the commentator license then to delve into each syllable of the title and the ways that they transform from their sounds into their transcendent meanings. This process of connecting sounds and meanings (*sgrādon*) plays a significant role in the way aural contemplative practices operate in this system, whereby attention to different sounds lead to distinct ‘meanings’, which can range from philosophical underpinnings of reality, as seen in this passage, to experiential realizations of larger mundane and transcendent worlds and their beings, and via that, to awakening in the three bodies of a Buddha.

Going through the list of letters from the Sanskrit version of the title, we are presented with a litany of ways transcendent reality abides and manifests: the mind itself arises from transcendent reality, with unceasing appearances of its expressive powers and dynamic qualities, and with a creative force that is both rooted in the emptiness of transcendent reality, demonstrative of phenomena’s lack of essence, and expressive of the three awakened bodies within oneself. Because each of these is the case, we receive the individual sounds that make up the title of this tantra, understanding of which, the commentary claims, alone leads to transcendence.

3.2.1.1.2 The Meaning of the Title

The second of the three sections to introduce the tantra’s title aims to “determine the foundational characteristics of reality in reliance on the fundamental nature of the title.”²⁰⁵ Thus, it seeks to understand transcendent reality through sound. It contends that

²⁰⁵ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 10.4.

the dynamic qualities²⁰⁶ of the title are the various terms within it, such as “precious.”

The commentary elaborates when it comes to the ways the title references abiding foundational reality.

The essential underlying nature of the title itself is “The Unimpeded Sound.” In addition, it itself arises perfectly out of the play of inexpressible reality because its specific dynamic qualities are inexpressible. For example, just as various needs and desires that emerge [are fulfilled by] a precious wish-fulfilling jewel, so do the various dynamic qualities of reality grow within a person who has perceived the experiential precepts of the Great Perfection’s key points. In that way, in order to bring forth the dynamic qualities of reality, everything is taught from this secret tantra.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 10.6-11.3

Despite its longer forms, the core of the title is the *Unimpeded Sound*, pointing to a type of sound emerging directly from transcendent reality. The dynamic qualities that give rise to the tantra also grow within a practitioner who experientially realizes the Great Perfection teachings within it.

This subsection continues to enumerate the different parts of this essential title, *The Unimpeded Sound, sgra thal ‘gyur*, listing out the various groupings of sound to be covered. Importantly for its focus on the transcendent, it presages the discussion on the five transcendent descents of sound by quoting the root verses:

“The five descents of sound – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Kalapingka, Elemental Sounds, and the Words of the Teacher.” These are taught in extensively branch sections. Their purposes, supreme, ordinary, and otherwise, are also taught below.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 11.5-12.1

This clearly centers the discussion on transcendent sound into these five sections,

²⁰⁶ The Tibetan term dynamic qualities (*yon tan*) often used with transcendent deities, and is one of the five aspects of a Buddha: Body, speech, mind, dynamic qualities, and awakened activities.

though one of them, elemental sounds, will eventually surpass the others in importance. Here we are also teased with the roles of these sounds: supreme and ordinary, i.e., transcendent and mundane. The reason to engage with these five descents of transcendent sound are because of their connections with these two larger categories, foreshadowing the work the text will be doing to create sonic imaginations around both the mundane world and transcendence.

It concludes with contextualizing sonic transcendence within contemplative practice. While both the texts and I will dive into these practices in later sections, the commentary uses this opportunity to place contemplative aural practice within the larger discussion of the sonic imagination of transcendence. While it frames this discussion in terms of a rubric for compassion used as a part of bodhisattva preliminary training,²⁰⁷ the contents of each section have little to do with this organization. Perhaps the biggest connection to this rubric is that both present preliminary practice material. Thus, this commentary could be attempting to riff on the previous, well-known rubric to place itself within a wider conversation around preliminary contemplative practices.

Regardless, the first section, “taking one’s own benefit as primary”, discusses a trio of Great Perfection preliminary practices related to the practice of Separating Existence and Transcendence (*‘khor ‘das ru shan*).

Furthermore, as for the word “sound” from the tantra’s title in the context of separating [mundane existence and transcendence]:

The sound of the body separates out mundane existence in reliance on sounds

²⁰⁷ This is the three types of courage with regards to compassion – metaphors used in preliminary practices that refer to how one leads beings to awakening, with the greater emphasis placed on others, the higher the level of courage required, and thus the more virtuous. For more modern discussion of these metaphors within the tradition, see *The Words of My Perfection Teacher*.

made and making sounds with the body. Therefore, at this time, simply doing anything now cuts future connection to them. Thus, mundane existence is separated.

The sound of speech separates out mundane speech in reliance on various utterances of sound. Thus, simply saying anything now cuts the future connection to it and mundane speech is separated.

The sound of the mind separates out mundane mind in reliance on various thoughts, measures, and recollections of sounds. Thus, simply thinking about anything now cuts the future connection to it and mundane mind is separated.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 28.6-29.4

At first glance, these may appear more closely related to sonic imagination of the mundane, as it refers again and again to mundane existence, or to the design of aural contemplative practice, as it provides prescriptions for how to engage the sonic body, speech, and mind. However, the goal of the Separating Existence and Transcendence preliminary practices is to isolate mundane existence in preparation for directly perceiving transcendence. This often comes as the preliminary for the visionary experiences of the Great Perfection's flagship practice, Direct Crossing. However, here we find sound in the central position. The sounds of one's body, speech, and mind, are used to cut through mundane experiences and prepare the practitioner for transcendent perceptions. Important to note is that a core aspect to this practice is a sort of wild abandonment of social rules regarding the appropriateness of activities and speech. In the Separating practice, one is encouraged to yell out profanities, run around naked, and so forth – cutting through their limits as a necessary preparation for experiencing transcendence, which is beyond limits. In this way, sound is inserted into the imagination around preliminary methods for experiencing transcendence.

The second preliminary practice, which is said to prioritize the benefit of others,

focuses on the sounds of the elements and their results. This is a reference to the *Listening to the Elements* practice, which is discussed in greater detail later. That practice is considered a preliminary practice, though it should not be understood as having less connection with transcendence because of it. The resultant abilities in this section, however, tend to what the tradition would call ‘ordinary’ accomplishments stemming from achieving power over the natural elements – the ability to travel through stone, control the oceans, hold fire, and change the course of the wind. While these may seem like extraordinary accomplishments, because they are not related to the transcendence of suffering within mundane existence, they are still seen as ordinary. These will be discussed at greater length in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. However, the inclusion of these unique listening practices within more standardized forms of Great Perfection preliminary contemplative practice demonstrates one way that the author attempts to integrate the sonic imaginations of this text within a broader Buddhist imagination of contemplation and practices of transcendence.

The third preliminary practice, which sees self and other as inseparable, returns to the categorization of the sounds of body, speech, and mind, and once again takes up standard practices found within the Separating Existence and Transcendence practice literature.

Or, if it is done in the context of the preliminaries of body, speech, and mind:

The sound of body: By staying in the adamantine posture, you reverse attachment to the body.

The sound of speech: By remaining joined to the letter hung, mere utterances become mantric words.

The sound of mind: by investigating the places of [mental] arising, staying, and going, all thoughts become meditative contemplation.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 30.2-4

The sound of the body points to the adamantine posture practice, in which one remains in a physically taxing position with their hands joined above them until they are physically unable to continue, at which point they fall and experience a great easefulness in the body that is used to direct their attention to experiences of transcendence. The sound of speech uses the *Hung* song, an auralization in which one recites “*Hung*” many times and witnesses the shapes of the letters emerge from themselves onto objects such as a stick in front of them. The sound of mind follows a normative Buddhist mental investigation into the nature of thoughts by using the tripartite rubric of arising, staying and going – which is what all transient thoughts do.

The inclusion of these practices again signals an attempt at integration between this sonic imagination of transcendence and other accepted Great Perfection imaginations. However, it appears that sound is not merely a place holder in this context. In previous sections, sound was located within the tantric body, and thus it would be reasonable that practices of the body would use that sonic physiology as a foundation both philosophically and practically. The sound of speech is quite obvious – *Hung* is a recitation practice – but indicates that the focus of the practice should be on the sonic, rather than the visual, which is sometimes the perspective from which this practice is considered as a preliminary to the visionary experiences of the Direct Crossing. Finally, we have already witnessed earlier in this section the notion that our minds are full of sounds. The realm of sound is not merely an external perception, but in the same way that we can see memories and visualize awakened maṇḍalas, so too does the mind have the capacity, and habit, of hearing things from the past, talking to ourselves, and imagining an auralized transcendent world. Here then, sounds may act as a focus for the mental

stages of thoughts arising, abiding, and departing inherent in any cognitive activity. However, while these all point to possibilities in the ways these practices were considered and created within this sonic imagination of transcendence, the commentary gives no further information regarding their specifics, and we are left to wonder over their actual usage. Regardless, though, their inclusion in these transcendent paradigms is indicative of the commentary's attempt to create sonic imagination of transcendence.

3.2.1.1.3 The Symbolism of the Title

The third and final section of the commentary's introduction of the title describes the symbolic meaning of the title. It breaks down each syllable, similar to ways we've witnessed previously, and discusses how each is symbolic of transcendent reality and its manifestation into the world.

Now is the presentation on the signs of the title taught as the arising of all appearances and designations as the experience of reality, in reliance on the mere words (of the title). Within this context, the title is "The Tantra of Great Unimpeded Sound, the Jewel Creator." Without changing the meaning of the title, it radiates various imputations of words, from which the designations also are simply symbols. Reality also self-arises as simple symbols. When it appears also, it self-appears as simple symbols. When it emerges, it self-emerges as symbols. When it abides, it self-abides as symbols. When it is liberated, it is self-liberated as symbols. From this, all conduct is play. All appearances and designations are colors and ornaments. All transcendence and existence self-arise as symbols. From this, natural symbols like these are subsumed by appearances and resonances, all of which emerge as the signs of reality.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 33.2-6

We are first presented with an overview of the nature of symbolism, both for the words in the title of the tantra, as well as part of the nature of transcendent reality's manifestations. We are told that all appearances and names are an experience of reality through the sounds and meanings of this title. Each word of the title itself also contains

many meanings – they are symbols for complexes of ideas, imaginations, and practices. In this same way, reality manifests as symbols in all its modes, from its appearance to its emergence, abiding, and liberation. If this basis, transcendent reality, arises as symbols, then so too do its two divergent paths – mundane existence and the transcendence of it. All phenomena – everything that is seen and heard – thus are both symbolic in nature and the emergence of transcendent reality.

The commentary then proceeds to discuss the symbolism behind each word of the title. “Jewels” are seen as emerging from the knowledge that “all appearances and designations are natural symbols.”²⁰⁸ This features a small dip into the Mahāyāna philosophical arguments on emptiness, which pits designations of singular and many against each other to denote that neither can be logically established. “Maker” turns to the verbal expression of words and inexpressible transcendence.

“Maker” – the symbols of expression rely on words and letters. The inexpressible symbols of reality are made to emerge from speech naturally. Further, arising in reliance on whatever, all expressions are words. All words are designations. All designations are names. All names have no nature. And the scope of having no nature is emptiness.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 34.4-6

The symbolism of maker is about how transcendent reality is ‘made’ to manifest. Again, analogizing this manifestation to verbal expression, the commentary likens the verbal symbols that are expressed to the symbols of reality, which canonically cannot be expressed, and yet still emerges from speech in a natural way. In either case, we are led down a series of equations, which logically takes the reader from expressions, through

²⁰⁸ The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 2.1.3.

words, designations, names, and the fact that names have no inherent nature. This all leads us back to the emptiness of transcendent reality, as “the scope of being without nature is emptiness.”

“Sound” is a sign of activity and designation. Furthermore, all activities are destroyed, the scope of destruction is impermanence, and the scope of impermanence is empty and self-less. Likewise, the scope of reality is also empty and selfless. Thus, because it completes the greatness of reality, it is called sound.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 34.6-35.1

Sound is understood in the dual functionality of doing and naming. Leading from this, we are again taken through several logical propositions, whereby all activities, including those done through sound, are destroyed, leading to impermanence and thus the emptiness and self-lessness of transcendence. In a slightly opaque etymology, we are told it is called “sound” because it “completes the greatness of reality.” While it is uncertain precisely in what way it does this or why that gives it the designation of sound, regardless, we again find sound and transcendent reality intimately entwined.

This is followed by an explanation of “unimpeded,” which is cast as a “symbol of abiding.” That which abides in the body, such as sound, is known as “the mode of abiding,” another nomenclature of transcendent reality. After this, in a similar fashion, we are led to this unimpeded abiding as being empty and pure. “Great” points to the Great Perfection, which it says is beyond the methodologies of Mahāyoga practice, namely the four generative wheels in the tantric body. It follows the three-part rubric of foundation, path, and fruition, to disclose how it is symbolic of abiding, expression, and transcendent nature respectively.

In the symbolism around the word tantra, we are given details about the transcendent nature of the senses more widely:

“Tantra”: in reliance on the symbols of conditioned existence, all compounded factors are resolved as impermanent. In reliance on the symbols of the tantra of accomplishment, words and meanings are realized to be inseparable. In reliance on the symbols of non-appearance, all emergent sensations are realized to be reality. In reliance on the symbols of blessings, the senses are naturally free. These are complete as the signs of the aspects of body and speech.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 35.4-6

While the compounded factors of mundane phenomena are impermanent, words and their meanings are said to be inseparable when one relies on tantric literature and practice. This foreshadows the importance of the connection between sounds and meanings later in the text. In addition, we are told that sensations are realized as reality, and that the senses are naturally liberated. This furthers the idea of transcendent reality manifesting into sensory, and specifically, sonic forms; and while they appear and resonate, they remain grounded in this foundational reality.

The introduction of the title concludes with the word “titled”, signifying that this text, consisting of words and letters, is made for faithful beings – i.e., those whose commitment to Buddhist imaginations is steadfast, and eager to attune to these new, sonic imaginations.

3.2.1.2 Thus, Have I Heard - The Narrative Introduction

The narrative introduction (*gleng gzhi*) is a common framing device for Buddhist texts.

This is the sections in sutras and tantras that begins “Thus, have I heard” in reference to the historically oral nature of these texts and the ways that orality entered into Buddhist imaginations of authenticity, lineage, reception, and scriptural formatting. Indeed, this text itself includes that phrase, indicating that a redactor was in audience and conversation with a being of the transcendent pantheon, in this case Vajradhara, who bestowed this tantra verbally. However, while that is a rich topic to explore within the

creation of aural and sonic Buddhist imaginations, it is somewhat outside the scope of this chapter, and further discussion of it can be found in my own introduction.

Here, I would like to zoom into the common introduction and a listing of the *Unimpeded Sound*'s transcendent pantheon. In particular, we will find in this section an introduction to the five divine descents of sound, and how they fit within this tantra's sonic imagination of transcendence.

3.2.1.2.1 Brahmā and the Staked Houses

The section creates an architecture of 18 stacked houses, a phrase we will hear throughout descriptions of transcendent deities such as Brahmā and Viṣṇu, two of the five sources of divine sonic descent. These manifest as miraculous reflection-like emanations from the teaching of this tantra, and thus the commentary prefaces the entire cosmology with a grounding in transcendent reality – it “emerges as the self-sound of reality which is authentically prior to all words.”²⁰⁹ Here, we are not only informed of the transcendent pantheon's connection to sonic transcendent reality, but also are given another descriptor of that reality, that the self-sound of transcendence is prior to all words. As to be expected, it is not a verbal contrivance, but rather part of reality's nature, as well as its effulgence into the world in transcendent and mundane ways.

The eighteen vertically spaced houses are termed the “stacked houses of Mt. Meru,” though in a technical sense these do not comprise a transcendent pantheon in the way it is traditionally considered. According to traditional Buddhist views of the divide between mundane existence and transcendence, we find an array of beings who are beyond the

²⁰⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 61.2.

scope of our experience or capacities, who nevertheless are considered mundane because they have not been liberated from the bonds of suffering. In contrast, transcendent beings are awakened and beyond suffering. As such, the beings of the six realms, even though they include mighty gods in heavens, all belong to the mundane realm, and were thus discussed under that paradigm. They are the classic example of what constitutes mundane existence.

However, here, we are clearly given a different cosmology – a list of powerful beings, some that have their own tantric practices dedicated to them, that maps onto the topography of the holy mountain at the center of the universe. At the top of this mountain, we find the five sources of divine sound. The three non-Buddhist sources are identified as awakened, and the Buddhist teacher as well as the elements are discussed in terms of the beings they help with their sonic transcendence. In this vein, I will contain the presentation of the entire section to the imagination of transcendence. In terms of structure, the commentary is placing lesser beings with greater ones; in terms of cast, some of these lesser beings appear in other sections that are meant to showcase transcendent sounds; and in terms of narrative, the same processes that awaken these greater non-Buddhist deities, are also applied to all the beings in this pantheon.

I will, though, only give a brief accounting of these lesser deities of the eighteen stacked houses. It is important to remember that each is stated to emerge as a miraculous emanation of the self-sound of reality. Thus, regardless of the status within the transcendent pantheon, they are all grounded in that sonic transcendent reality. The organization of the houses is vertical. Each is identified by its inhabitant, the amount of space above it before the next house, and the defining characteristic of that space. Thus,

“the first house is the house of the Yaksha. Above this is 100 million fathoms of variegated space.”²¹⁰ The other beings on this list include Nagas, Kimnaras, Earth-Protectors, the Eight Planets, the titan Sound Possessor, The Guardian Kings of the Four Directions – the Lord of the Ghandarvas, the Lord of the Kumbhahdas, the King of the Nagas, and Vaishravana the King of Mountain Deities and Buddhist god of wealth – as well as the Heaven of the Thirty-three, Tushita Heaven, The Heaven of Delighting in the Creations, The Heaven of Controlling others Emanations, and the Peak of Play – the top of the desire realm before the beginning of the Form realm. These are mostly normative accounts of Buddhist cosmology, and are all squarely set within the Desire realm, and thus would be technically mundane, if they were not awakened by the sound of this tantra:

Then, these words (of the Unimpeded Tantra) self-emergently emerge as the self-sound of reality in the sky between the stacked houses. Thereby, the physical beings who reside inside the stacked houses from before also attain the result of Buddhahood spontaneously. Thus, cyclical existence is stirred from its depths.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 65.4-6

The tantra reverberates as the emergent sound of transcendent reality in these spaces between houses. This resonance of transcendence affects the mundane inhabitants of all the houses, awakening them into Buddhahood, both demonstrating the transcendent capacity of the sounds of the text, which are equated with the sound of reality, and offering the beginning of a sonically-based transcendent pantheon.

Above these (now) transcendent beings, we find the deities the *Unimpeded Sound* is most interested in – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the Kalapingka bird.

²¹⁰ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 61.3.*

“The four above that” means in the east the field of joyful music, in the south the field of playful music, in the west the field of blissful music, and in the north the field of extremely unsteady mind. Above these four, is the house of the unshaking array, the equality of high and low. It is called the Rain of Jewels that Totally Blazes Light. In this house, the deity Great Brahmā (resides), totally surrounded by his retinues of limitless billions of divine sons who are completely unshakable, an immense number of divine daughters who are without desire and have achieved patience, as well as an incalculable number of various others whose natural forms are indistinguishable. In front of him, in the center of his gaze, from the innumerable faces of the king, Great Brahmā, there emerge words of melodious sound. ...

In the Abode of Great Brahmā thus described, the perfect authentic Buddha sends out Shiva, the top-knotted one, completely adorned with eight ornaments. ... From his mouth emanates the pure resonance of the variegated Brahmā melody, whereby the root of all scriptures, this Unimpeded Sound Tantra is spoken from the state of limitless meditative concentration that appears as manifest reflections, and via harsh sounds that are uttered in numbers that are distinguished thoroughly from among the 800,000 emanating melodies of the god Great Brahmā. Thus, from the mouths of Brahmā’s limitless retinue as well, these words self-emergently emerge, whereby (all the beings in) the Brahmā worlds all at once become Buddhas, and they keep cyclic existence from reappearing.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 63.6-65.4

The description of Brahmā’s abode, and the ways sound affects and radiates from him, is the most detailed of the three. We are invited to imagine four further realms above the eighteen stacked houses, each a directional field of music that is either joyful, playful, blissful, or unsteady. Above this is a visually stunning mansion, studded with gleaming imagery of raining jewels sparkling like firelight. This is Great Brahmā’s house, where he sits surrounded by an infinity of divine sons and daughters. From the many mouths of this great king, melodies resound.

This scene, as visually and aurally pleasing as it is, is interrupted by the introduction of the Buddha’s emissary, the Indian god Śiva. He too speaks with the purity of Brahmā’s melodious voice. However, when he opens his mouth, the *Unimpeded Sound*, the basis

for all Buddhist scriptures, as this commentary claims, reverberates forth with harsh sounds chosen from among the nearly limitless sounds of Brahmā, and from a meditative absorption that appears in the world as the reflections of miraculous emanations that are witnessed in this section.

Brahmā and his retinue attune to these scriptural, melodious, and harsh sounds reflective of transcendent reality, and all the beings in his realm attain awakening. This is also where all the other inhabitants of previous houses attain awakening, through the emergence of the sound of the tantra in this way. Thus, we are provided with a narrative retelling of the ways sound affected and liberated even the highest gods of the world. We are also given a backstory for how Brahmā's sound came to be one of the divine descents of sound that lead to awakening and are championed by this Buddhist text.

3.2.1.2.2 Viṣṇu and The Kalapingka

Viṣṇu and the King of kalapingka birds are handled similarly.

Then, the god Great Viṣṇu, completely surrounded by his limitless retinue, descends into a cavity of Mt. Meru. He speaks, teaching in his own sounds via blessings of the Buddha's speech. Great Viṣṇu, together with his unimaginable retinue, utters this [Unimpeded Sound] itself into words. Thus, Viṣṇu and his retinue attain Buddhahood, whereby the realms of Viṣṇu are emptied.

Then, in the directionless space of the Saha world system, the Kalapingka descends into the immeasurable house that has 7,200,000 [stories]. The sonic-melodies are the sounds called completely frontal, faithful, and highly elaborate. The teaching is taught via these sounds, through which the King of Kalapingkas with his retinue attain the result of Buddhahood spontaneously, and its worlds are emptied.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 65.6-66.4

Viṣṇu descends into Mt Meru and speaks with the voice of the Buddha, uttering the *Unimpeded Sound* and thereby awakening himself and all the beings in his realm.

Likewise, the Kalapingka descends into the world in its immeasurable mansion. It sings with melodious and elaborate birdsong which serve to teach the *Unimpeded Sound*, again awakening the King of the Kalapingka birds and all the birds and beings of that realm. In both narratives, as in Brahmā's story, we find certain non-Buddhist entities that have the capacity, often through the blessing of the Buddha, to recite the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra in their voices and songs, thus imbuing their own sounds with the transcendent qualities found in this Tantra, liberating beings around them, and descending into the world where their sounds can be accessed by other beings, who too can attain awakening through engaging with their transcendent sounds. Thus, the sounds and meanings of these transcendent deities become both scripture and objects of contemplative sonic practice:

If one asks how the sublime doctrine, that is the initial authenticity, emerges as this way, it is the unspeakable self-sound of the above [deities].

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 67.1

3.2.1.2.3 The Teacher's Voice

To complete the five descents of divine sound, the commentary engages the sound of the Teacher's voice and the sounds of the elements in a different rubric – birth-type. This is a Buddhist typology by which the beings of the mundane world are categorized according to how they are born: miraculously, such as the gods, hell-beings, or certain bodhisattvas; from an egg, such as snakes and birds; from heat and moisture, such as certain insects; or from a womb – human and mammal birth. This is a somewhat odd and unsatisfactory typology to incorporate here, given that human instruction does not appear to be linked to the divine beings presented in the five descents model, though that model is foundational to the human-oriented sonic practices throughout the text. In the discussions that follow,

the method for teaching each of these types of sentient beings is delivered. It begins with the Teacher's voice, which is used to awaken beings of miraculous birth:

Third is the awakened speech, settled into merely expressed words, for the beings of miraculous births. Furthermore, there are 100 awakened speeches that radiate from the awakened forms of Tamers, 100 awakened speeches that radiate from the awakened speech of Illuminators, and one hundred awakened speech words that radiate from the awakened mind of Abiders. This collection of 300 and the thirty words of taming with enlightened activities and the thirty words of the complete way of Qualities, makes sixty more sounds. By following those, the awakened speech of the teacher naturally emerges even from within the millions and billions of beings born of miraculous births. Thus, by understanding the meanings of those words uttered thus, those of this birth attain the fruit of Buddhahood.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 67.1-5

This description introduces the 360 sounds of the teacher's voice. There are three types of teachers expressing awakened speech, each tied to an aspect of Buddhahood. Tamers are teachers of the awakened form of the Buddha, who are likely akin to the six sages of each realm, also called tamers in their capacity to tame beings of the individual realms. Illuminators and Abiders are less evocative of specific Buddha archetypes but represent teachers in their awakened speech and awakened mind aspects. Each speaks with one-hundred awakened sounds. In addition, thirty words come from enlightened activities of taming and another thirty from dynamic qualities of the Buddha, completing the quintet of Buddha aspects. These sounds resonate across all the worlds to all the beings born in miraculous ways, and by hearing these sounds of the teacher's voice, they too attain awakening.

3.2.1.2.4 The Sound of the Elements

The final descent of divine sound, though it is not the final birth, is the sound of the elements.

Then, descending into the abode of beings who are born from eggs, The Elements – the external signs of the reality of the sound of earth, the reality of the sound of water, the reality of the sound of fire, and the reality of the sound of wind – arise due to the dynamism of method and wisdom [in] individual sounds [for] sentient beings. Through this, there is the cause that makes the sounds for the bodies of individual sentient beings, the duo of hot and cold elements. From this, the productive cause internally transforms, whereby there are 8,000 sounds for the bodies of individual sentient beings, which transform into the 8,000 melodies. ... At this time, via the apprehension of knowledgeable ones, in all times it not without connection to reality.

Furthermore, there are 4,000 external elemental sound markers. If one trains on the sound of earth, in one moment they will know the 1,000 different self-sounds of reality. Furthermore, [they know] the sound of abiding reality. Likewise, there is the sound of reality from engaging in water, the sound of reality through destroying in fire, and the sound of reality of separating by training on wind. The thousand for each is known in an instant.... Internally, there are 4,000 sounds of reality that emerge from training. By habituating the reality of the channels, one knows 1,000 instantly. Those are the sounds of illuminating reality. Their essence is the reality of bliss. By habituating the reality of non-conceptual self-power that is empty via the winds, one knows the 1,000 sounds and meanings of the reality of coemergent union. By knowing those, it is certain that one optimizes the movement of space and awareness. Those appear as the blessings of the teacher. The sentient beings of the time of being born from eggs, such as the divine son, Supreme Joy of Renunciate Hair Cutting and so forth, attain the result of Buddhahood by merely speaking in melodious words. Via this, the places of beings born from eggs are cut off. Therefore, this is called the Highest Tantra that completely liberates the three realms.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 67.5-69.4

Elemental sound descends into the world²¹¹ as the external signs of foundational sonic realities – the transcendent reality of the sounds of fire, earth, water, and wind. This sonic basis turned elemental material, in turn produces beings, who are comprised of these elemental makeups – a core reason why elemental bodies are matched to exterior elemental sounds in the design of contemplative practices. Within these bodies, there are

²¹¹ Albeit for beings born from eggs, a confusing stipulation considering its great importance to human practice in this text.

8,000 sounds and resultant melodies.

When each elemental set of sounds is further divided, these 8,000 sounds become 4,000 external and 4,000 internal sounds. Listening to the external sounds gives way to the self-sound of reality each through its own means – the sound of reality comes through the abiding sound of earth, the engaging sound of water, the destructive sound of fire, and the separating sounds of wind. Instantaneous knowledge of these is enough to direct one to the need for transcendence. Internally, 1,000 sounds that illuminate reality are known through working with the channels of the tantric body, and another 1,000 sounds and their corresponding meanings of non-dual union²¹² are known through training on the winds of the tantric body. The other two thousand sounds are unaccounted for.

Regardless, beings of this birth are awakened by reciting this text melodiously. Thus, even in this opaque context, the transcendent imagination of the sounds of the elements is introduced as capable of affecting experiences of reality through connections between inner and outer elemental words.

The remaining typology of births, though that is not my primary objective, can also prove useful in understanding the broader sonic imagination of transcendence. For instance, for beings born from heat and moisture it reads:

Although limitless general doctrines of vehicles are spoken, because this one that liberates into the result instantly is so profound, it creates special qualities, meaning that via the awakened speech of the causal Buddha of sound, for those beings born from heat and moisture also, the words of the so-called “Foundation that emerges from the reality of sounds and words” proliferates without having to do anything.

²¹² Another code for transcendent reality and its emanation as appearance and emptiness, or within the transcendent pantheon as the male and female divine consorts.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 69.4-6

Thus, even beings outside the rubric of the five descents are awakened through sound, because this teaching is so profound. A small but noteworthy addition in this passage is the description of transcendence as “the awakened speech of the causal Buddha of sound.” This is perhaps the only instance this phrase is used, however is evocative in establishing a sonic base for transcendent reality and its emergent pantheon.

What are humans left with? Having delivered all his sources of transcendent sound, the commentator takes this opportunity to detail a fairly normative doxography of Buddhist practice and thought, with the Great Perfection at its peak. It curiously does not mention the sonic practices of this text and seems quite different in character than the rest of the section. Perhaps the author simply needed space for such a doxography and perceives it as normalizing these kinds of sonic imaginations within a wider Buddhist cosmos. In either case, the reader is left with an imagination teeming with the transcendent possibilities of sound – one that will be further realized in sections of the root text and commentary aimed specifically at the formation of such imaginations.

3.2.2 The Five Descents of Divine Sound

The core idea of the sonic imagination of transcendence for the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is the Five Descents of Divine Sound.

*The expressions of sound are such that
(They) are an amazing wonder
Not explained in other tantras -
Listen to me through my elaborations.*

*The site of sound's descent is fivefold:
Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Pingka bird,
The elements' sounds, and the Teacher's Speech.*

*The doctrines emerging via these five [sonic sources]
Are practiced in a great play at your pleasure.*

The Unimpeded Sound Tantra, 1.4

Here we find the transcendent pantheon of sound, laid out previously in the introduction, in full focus in the main body of the text. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the creation of this sonic imagination appears at the beginning of the first, and primary chapter of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra and its commentary, in a section that seeks to understand the meaning of the title. It takes each syllable – *sgra*, *thal*, ‘*gyur* – and opens an exploration of the world of the *Unimpeded Sound*. The section on *thal* – ‘unimpeded’ or ‘dust’ in the translation of the single syllable²¹³ - is centered on mundane and transcendent cosmologies, using jewel ‘dust’ as a key aspect of those worlds. This section will be briefly discussed here after the five descents of sound, as the sound of transcendent reality enters into the creation of the world. The third section on ‘*gyur*, ‘change’, deals with the changes of the elements, and is a useful addition to the elemental imagination that intersects with the text’s sonic imagination, though discussion on the elements will be limited in this dissertation to the ways it specifically overlaps contemplative design, experience, and imagination on sound.

The commentary takes this opportunity at the outset of deeper discussions around the sonic imaginations of transcendence, mundane existence and contemplative practice within the five descents of divine sound to frame these later discussions firmly in a paradigm of transcendence.

In this section [concerning the fourth question of chapter one], in reliance upon sound, there are the experiential precepts on the meaning of the Great Perfection

²¹³ The term “Unimpeded” in the tantras title is actually the combination of *thal* and ‘*gyur*.”

precepts. From within this [title], by precisely analyzing it in terms of its mere words, the precepts are opened to you. Thus, the syllables of the words in the title accord with the meaning of reality, and thereby deliver you to the essence of ultra-pure awareness.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 109.5-6

The teachings on sound in the *Unimpeded Sound*, titulary central to the text's overall discourse and imaginations, thus present the experiential precepts of the Great Perfection – contemplative instruction and ideology from Buddhas and realized masters of these traditions – which lead to the direct experience of transcendent reality. The term “experiential precepts” also has doxographical significance. This text, the *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra, is considered the root text of the Experiential Precepts class of Great Perfection literature, alongside the Mind and Space classes that are historical and ideological predecessors. Within this traditional Great Perfection doxography, the Experiential Precepts class is considered superior among the three,²¹⁴ providing practitioners with the highest level of contemplative practices and generating robust and novel imaginations of the face of transcendence and paths to reach it, such as *Listening to the Elements* and the visionary experiences of Direct Crossing which are unique to this class of literature.

The supremacy and the authenticity of the experiential precepts coming from a realized being is further elaborated on in the commentary with an expansion of the teacher of this doctrine, the Buddha Vajradhara:

To expand on that, the expressions of transcendent sounds are such that a

²¹⁴ Though this likely has more to do with historical one-ups-manship that many Tibetan traditions undergo, whereby the later iterations of traditions or new traditions promote themselves as superior to the older traditions, in the same way that Mahāyāna denigrated early Buddhist traditions by calling them Hinayana, or lesser vehicle, and Tantra sees itself above either.

doctrine like this is not explained by me in other tantras of the Secret Mantra and is an amazing marvel. Within this very doctrine, I have made [of the expressions of transcendent sound] into a path, whereby one becomes awakened.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 109.6-110.1

The commentator takes up the root verses in which the Buddha introduces the text he is about to teach to the redactor and fills in where the root verse is terse. The Buddha identifies that the reason this teaching is special and superior, is its focus on the expression of transcendent sound by the five deities of their sonic transcendent pantheon. Because it is so special, it is not found anywhere else, and thus is marvelous to behold. Further, the Buddha has turned these expressions of sound into a Buddhist path that leads to awakening, marking both its basis in transcendence and its special capacity to lead practitioners there. Finally, this entire reenactment of the Buddha's oration serves to not only promote the transcendent qualities of the teaching and sound but identify it as a teaching that has been taught by the Buddha. It is thus authentic in its lineage and based in the kind of awakened experience expected of a Experiential Precepts class text of the Great Perfection. The commentator's expansion of this at the outset of the discourse on the five descents of transcendent sound further indicates its importance within the creation of this sonic imagination of transcendence.

3.2.2.1 Brahmā's Sound

Each of the five sections on the descents of transcendent sound begins with an explanation that identifies these sounds within their transcendent contexts.

Second is the presentation on training on locations of (transcendent) sound (within beings' psycho-physical aggregates) in terms of Great Brahmā's Abode (atop the) Multi-Storied Houses, through which everything arises as reality. "Brahmā" refers to the Great Brahmā of dynamic qualities, which is the special basis that makes the emanations of the Buddhas emerge.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 111.1-3

Brahmā is identified according to the narrative introduction’s transcendent cosmology that transformed non-Buddhist deities into agents of awakened speech who descended into the world and liberated their followers with their individual sounds. Alongside the use of his full title, “Great Brahmā,” this passage evokes the imagery and narratives of the previous introduction with its return to the iconic multi-storied houses, on top to which Brahmā resided, and who were awakened through the Brahmā’s speech. The simple inclusion of all five of the transcendent deities in both that introductory cosmology and this rubric of five descents of transcendent sounds, however, is sufficient for us to identify the two as linked.

In addition to recalling the previous narrative, this passage establishes Brahmā and his sound as residing within transcendent reality and causative of the transcendent pantheon. All things “arise as reality” through engaging with the transcendent sounds of Brahmā, meaning that the realization of these sounds connect one to transcendent reality. His description as possessing “dynamic qualities” (*yon tan*), evokes descriptions of awakened beings, for whom dynamic qualities make up one of their five attributes alongside body, speech, mind, and awakened activities. Finally, Brahmā is marked as a basis (*gzhi*) that creates Buddha emanations – transcendent beings thus emerge into the pantheon due to Brahmā and his sounds.

3.2.2.2 Viṣṇu’s Sound

Likewise, the commentary for the descent of the sound of Viṣṇu into the world opens its discussion by contextualizing Viṣṇu’s sound within transcendence. The Tibetan etymology of his name as the one who “pervades and engages” (*’khyap ’jug*) is used to imagine his transcendent capacities.

Pervasion is fivefold. In reliance on (Viṣṇu's sound) pervading the elements and thereby indicating the signs of the elements, appearances are linked to reality. In dependence upon (Viṣṇu's sound) pervading the body, the body is free from sickness and suffering. In dependence upon pervading expression, there is recitation of the inexpressible which is the nature of all sounds and words. In dependence on pervading speech, you become learned in the experiential precepts on the combinations of words and meanings via the garlands of vowels and consonants. In dependence upon pervading the psyche, one hundred thousand meditative absorptions are born in one session.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 122.2-5

While these were pervasions were also considered in the mundane imagination of Viṣṇu's sound, here, I would like to focus on the ways his sound is considered to cause transcendence in each of these areas. Each of these sites of pervasion identifies Viṣṇu's connection to transcendence in some way and are manifested via his sounds. His transcendent sound pervades the elements and their external signatures, including their sonic signatures, thus connecting phenomenal appearances with transcendent reality. His sound is inherent in physical form, granting bodies his transcendence over suffering – the defining feature between mundane cyclic existence and transcendence. His sound underscores all verbal expression with this “inexpressible” transcendent reality that is the “nature of all sounds.” His sound pervades speech – the combination of words and meanings. Because his transcendent nature is thus embedded in speech, through recitations of the alphabet that comprises speech, all the spoken experiential precepts are said to be transmitted to a practitioner. His sound pervades the mind, giving it access to transcendent reality through instant and vast meditative absorption. Thus, Visnu's transcendence spans a holistic enumeration of the living beings and environments of the world – embedded in, and able to affect every aspect of life via his sounds which carry his transcendent qualities. With his transcendent sounds encoding both the world and the

beings within, the external material world made up of the elements is seen as reality, and beings' bodies, speech, and minds are beyond suffering, expressing inexpressible reality and teachings, and deep in contemplative realization of transcendent reality.

3.2.2.3 Kalapingka's Sound

The descent of the Kalapingka bird's sound describes its transcendence through a short narrative history.

Kala: A sage who possesses super-knowledges emanates in a great feathered [bird] form. From the sky, it emits its [transcendent] sound "ka hring" from which three hundred and sixty melodies emerge: initially, these [emerge as] diverse emanations of awakened bodies, from which arise one hundred and twenty special aspirations which are causes [for future beings]. Because those aspirations are not reversed, they emerge as one hundred and twenty specific sounds and melodies in the bodies of future yogi disciples. [Thus,] there are one hundred and twenty locations in the body, [speech, and mind each] for training on these sounds.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 133.3-6

In an explanation of the first half of Kalapingka's name, we are told a story of the transcendence of a realized master sage (*drang srong*, a translation of the Sanskrit *ṛṣi*), who has attained transcendent powers, transforms into a giant bird – the Kalapingka. The divine sound of this bird resonates throughout the world from the sky in three hundred and sixty melodies. This number of melodies causes a chain reaction that in the end suffuses beings with transcendent sound. It is also divided equally between all three parts of the process. First, Kalapingka's sound causes one hundred and twenty (one third of the melodies) awakened bodies to emerge. Awakened bodies (*sku*) is the term used for the body of a Buddha or transcendent being, and thus these melodies speak to that embodied aspect of transcendence and initiate the process of it coming into the world. From these sonically produced transcendent beings arise one hundred and twenty aspirations (the

second third of the melodies) or intents of faith (*mos pa*). This term is used to show inclination and desire towards virtue and Buddhist goals, part of the basis for Buddhist practice.

This statement also has an inherent karmic orientation. These sonically created aspirations of transcendent deities become the causes for future beings. In the future generations after these transcendent beings, the karma of these deities' aspirations comes to fruition as the emergence of mundane beings, who are thus physically imbued with one hundred and twenty transcendent melodies and sounds (the final third) of the Kalapingka. In this way, the Kalapingka's three hundred and sixty transcendent sounds resonate across transcendent pantheons and mundane beings and serve as the causation between the two. The three hundred and sixty transcendent sounds are all also found within beings, who can attune to them physically, verbally, and mentally, thereby gaining access to transcendent reality. Thus, at the end of the first set of physical practices regarding Kalapingka's sounds, the commentary reads: "Thus is the practice of the generation of experience of reality's own sound in dependence on physical activities."²¹⁵ The sound of transcendent reality is heard via Kalapingka's sounds, demonstrating again, the grounding of his melodies within transcendence.

3.2.2.4 Elemental Sound

The transcendence of the sound of the elements is more fully expanded upon in the *Listening to the Elements* contemplative practices, but there is a brief introduction to this transcendence within the larger context of the five descents of transcendent sound.

²¹⁵ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 136.2.

Now is the fifth subtopic, the presentation on closely planting the seed of the emanation body in reliance on the external locations of the sounds of the four elements. “Elements” is as follows: if we ask where they emerge, the characteristics of that which involves aware beings is made to emerge in dependence of that which is inanimate material. And the four elements of the internal body are made to emerge upon dependence on the four external elements. Thus, they are “emergent or elements.” Since the primordial knowing of awareness is made to emerge in direct immediacy in dependence upon the four elements of the internal body, they are called “emergent or elements.” Since the fruit of Buddhahood emerges without hinderance in dependence on the immediacy of the direct perception of awareness, they are called “emergent or elements.”

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 144.1-4

The sounds of the elements are most closely related to the emanational body of awakened beings – and thus is concerned with “planting the seed of the emanation body,” or creating the causes for beings to realize that aspect of transcendence. It is also connected with the other two awakened bodies – the enjoyment and reality bodies – which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections. Here, we are presented with a series of emergent causations that lead from the sounds of external, material elements, through beings, to the primordial knowing of transcendent reality and the fruition of awakening into a transcendent being. The Tibetan term, elements (*‘byung ba*) is also the verb “to emerge.” The commentary plays with this double-meaning in its sequence of causative events – each “emerging” from the previous and thus referencing back to the sonic source of this series of transcendent emergences – the “elements”.

The connection between the external elements and the internal elements of beings has already been discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. In this section, I will focus on how these emerge in terms of transcendent reality and transcendent pantheon. Once internal elements have been established as emergent from the sounds of external elements, the commentary posits that directly apprehending the four internal elements

gives rise to the realization of transcendent reality or “primordial knowing of awareness” (*rig pa'i ye shes*). This demonstrates the innate connection that the sounds of the external elements have to reality. The commentary further establishes elemental sounds' emergence as the transcendent pantheon: awakening into a transcendent being is dependent on directly perceiving this awareness of transcendent reality. Thus, we are told that Buddhas arise from listening to the sounds of the elements, drawing a direct and causative link between elemental sound and transcendent pantheon.

The commentary continues to elaborate on the transcendent imagination of elemental sound in terms of its transcendent aesthetics and potency:

The sounds and meanings of those elements are as follows: “heroic” means beautiful, powerful, and potent. Affected by (the elemental sounds’) beauty, one is made to directly perceive reality. And since one’s perceive is in dependence on the sounds of the elements, the appearances of this experience (of reality) intensify more and more, (making) beauty and heroism. In this way, it affects liberation into the far side (of transcendence) from cyclic existence and is called a “hero”. Its potency vanquishes all karma and emotional distortions. “Acting heroically,” means that it is acting to directly emit the potencies of the three-fold awakened bodies of the Buddha, and in particular, the power of the emanational body.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 144.4-145.2

The commentary paints an image of elemental sounds aesthetic and transcendent beauty. It is “heroic,” (*dpa'*) a term that is often used to signify bodhisattvas (*byangs chub sems dpa'*) and transcendent male and female protectors of Buddhism (*dpa' bo* and *dpa' mo*). Here, it is glossed as “beautiful, powerful, and potent”. Both the aesthetics and capacity of these transcendent sounds are at play in this context. The beauty of the elements' sounds is evocative of transcendent reality and causes one to directly perceive it (*mngon sum du mthong bar byed pa*). This experience of transcendent reality only

heightens once perceived due to the aesthetic beauty of the sounds and their capacity for transcendence. This gives rise to further “beauty and heroism” – the transcendent sounds and images within these experiences, as detailed in the *Listening to the Elements* contemplative practice, which represent the voices and images of a beautiful transcendent pantheon of heroes and heroines such as the Sky Dancer goddesses of the five Buddha families. These sounds are also dubbed “hero” because of their liberatory capacities – its basis in transcendence causes those who hear it to transcend mundane cyclic existence marked by suffering. It thus saves by “vanquish[ing] all karma and emotional distortions” – two of the core components of the suffering of cyclic existence, making it a “hero.” The precise way it does this is by bringing forth the potential of the three awakened bodies – the emanation, enjoyment, and reality bodies – that sonically come to bear on beings. Elemental sound is thus both shown to be based in transcendent reality and to transmit its three-fold awakened manifestation to beings who thereby are saved from suffering and enter the transcendent pantheon.

3.2.2.5 The Teacher’s Awakened Speech

This capacity of the transcendent elemental sounds to liberate beings is further taken up in the fifth and final descent – the sound of the Teacher’s voice.

Now is the sixth branch topic, the teaching on measures for ascertaining the blessings that are reliant on engagement with the teacher’s speech. “Past” is that those who previously became buddhas also expansively awakened as buddhas through training on the sounds and meanings of the four elements. “Future” buddhas also will become expansively awakened as buddhas through training on the sounds and meanings of the four elements. “Present buddhas” also train on the sounds and the meanings of the four elements.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 149.1-3

All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future train on the transcendent sounds of

the elements and thus attain their awakening. These sounds are thus inexorably linked to the emergence of a transcendent pantheon of Buddhas.

Though the attainment of Buddhahood is shown to be based on listening to the transcendent sounds of the elements, the teachers who thus practiced now speak with their own transcendent sounds:

These [Buddhas] can teach in any kinds of sounds and words through possessing special qualities of teaching and are thus called teachers. Concepts which are fixated on the subtle or coarse elements dissipate and expansion takes place in terms of the perfection in one of the awakened bodies... [Their voice being] “melodious,” it is pleasant to hear and acts to engage to others. Moreover, in dependence on verbal expression, there will appear diverse understandings for the individual minds of beings [when the teacher speaks], and thus in the mandala of a single word, all [phenomena and their meanings] gather in the state called beyond [normal understandings of] sounds, words, and names.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 149.3-150.1

The commentary understands the nature of the teacher’s voice to possess “special qualities” whereby his “sounds and words” break down the stagnant conceptions of the world that beings hold on the one hand, and sonically transmit the transcendence of the awakened bodies to beings on the other. Again, we find that the descent of transcendent sound, in this case through the teacher’s voice, acts to create a connection from transcendent reality and pantheon to mundane beings due to the transcendence inherent in the sounds.

The aesthetics of the teacher’s sounds is also commented upon. The root verses call it “melodious,” which the commentary understands as both sonorous and engaging to other. These melodious tones affect listeners in different ways. Seeming to follow a Mahāyāna idea that the Buddha teaches differently according to the student and what they need to hear via his skillful means. In this case, his singular voice contains an entire world of

meaning that beings understand according to their own minds. This ability is used to not only show the capacity of the teacher's voice, but also to identify the sounds they make as transcending mundane conceptions of sound and language. By containing an infinity of meanings and teachings, every sound of the Buddha is capable of leading listeners to awakening.

To expand on that, “in [the teacher’s] appearance for fortunate one” of the natural great perfection means that in reliance upon the site of [the teacher’s] sound arising as reality, the six senses such as the eyes and so forth of the six types of living beings are purified. Through that purity of senses, one links sound to reality. The sixty special qualities [of the teacher’s awakened speech in beings] emerge out of that.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 150.1-2

Finally, this passage definitively links the teacher's voice to transcendent reality and to their ability to transmit that reality to beings via sound. The site of the descent of the sound of the teacher is described as “sound arising as reality,” which serves to purify the senses of beings when they hear it. In the same turn, beings are then able to perceive the sound of transcendent reality through their own purified senses. This is all the basis for the host of transcendent results, transformations, and pantheons that beings will perceive via listening to the sound of the teacher's voice.

Across all five descents of transcendent sound into the world – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the Kalapingka bird, the elements, and the teacher's voice – the commentary presents diverse specific ways that sound is linked with transcendence and emanates it to beings.

However, the commentary also remains consistent in its description of the overall qualities of transcendent sound and its capacity. It is grounded in transcendent reality from which it can either manifest as beings of a transcendent pantheon or transmit that reality through the direct perception of listeners, who thereby realize that reality and

become awakened themselves. Moreover, within each of these descents of sound, some reference is made to the elemental sounds – whether they as a central site of descent, a factor in engaging transcendent sounds, a primary option that should only be abandoned if absolutely necessary, or the direct cause of the speaker’s own transcendence. The root verses and the commentary thus clearly delineate the sounds of the elements as the major source of transcendent sound and devote a detailed section on both its contemplative practice, as well as further delving into the transcendent qualities of elemental sound.

3.2.3 *The Three Awakened Bodies*

Listening to the Elements is the iconic practice of the *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra. It takes the elemental descent of transcendent sound from the previous section and explores contemplative practice on the sounds of water, earth, fire, and wind. Much of the discussion of this section will be reserved for Part Three of this dissertation, regarding the design of its contemplative practices and the experiential results of *Listening to the Elements* in these ways. However, the commentary is keen to provide its audience with a grounding of the practices in transcendent reality.

The practice begins with an explanation of its connection to transcendent reality in the form of the three awakened bodies of the Buddha:

Now, is the twenty-fifth question and answer of the first chapter. The presentation on training in the elemental sound and meanings, a guide for the three awakened bodies. ...

Awakened Body (has three components.) The reality body’s essence is emptiness without limit. Its nature is pure attention. Its compassion is beyond any imposed frame. Its cosmic field is naturally pure. The enjoyment body’s essence is totally complete luminous awareness. Its nature does not extend beyond the mandalas of light and spheres of light. Its compassion does not extend beyond the sensorium of the natural sound of reality. Its cosmic field is a perfectly arranged ornamental realm. The emanation body’s essence is made from the special sense fields. Its nature is indefinite. Its compassion emerges without bias. It appears and enters in

various cosmic fields....

By training on the sounds (of the elements), one will certainly attain accomplishment (of the three awakened bodies).

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 274.2-275.3

The initial title and discussion on *Listening to the Elements* concerns the three awakened bodies. In the full title to the practice, it is called “a guide for the three awakened bodies,” meaning that one will be awakened in these bodies if they train in the ways outlined in this practice. This is reinforced with a return to each of the awakened bodies in both the individual sections’ titles and the descriptions of results for each elemental sound practice. Listening to the sound of water awakens one into the emanation body, listening to the sound of earth leads to the enjoyment body, the sound of fire to the reality body, and the sound of wind to all three awakened bodies. Thus, the commentary introduces the fourth practice with “Now, fourth is the training on the sound of wind, a presentation on connecting experiences of the yogi to the three enlightened bodies.”²¹⁶

In this overall introduction to transcendent reality within *Listening to the Elements*, the root verses’ inclusion of the term “awakened body” (*sku*) is elaborated in terms of the three distinct bodies. Each of these three awakened bodies are described according to four categories: essence, nature, compassion, and cosmic field. These categories are evocative of three foundational qualities of transcendent reality in the Great Perfection – its empty essence, luminous nature, and its compassionate energy. These three are often linked with the three awakened bodies, though typically in one-to-one correlations, whereby the reality body abides as the empty essence, the enjoyment body reflects its luminous

²¹⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 283.6-284.1.

nature, and the emanation body materializes as its compassionate energy. However, all three categories are used for the awakened bodies in this context. In addition, a fourth category, cosmic field, is added for each of the bodies. The origin or purpose of this fourth category is uncertain, as it does not reoccur during the rest of the discussion around this practice. However, it is possible that this is linking to other instances of transcendent cosmologies within the text, such as in the fifth section of the first chapter which discusses the term Unimpeded (thal) from the title. Within that discussion, Buddhas exist on a variety of cosmic fields, which also spring from reality through a variety of sounds.

In this way, each of these awakened bodies and their categories presents insights into how transcendent reality and its manifestation should be understood within the context of the *Listening to the Elements* contemplative practice. The description for the reality body confirms its connection to the empty essence of transcendent reality in normative Great Perfection literature. Its nature then, is presented as “pure attention” (*dmigs pa rnam par dag pa*).²¹⁷ Its compassion is beyond any limit or border, meaning that within transcendent reality, there are no bounds to contain its natural outflowing of compassion without subject or object. And naturally, its cosmic field is pure, without any elaboration.

Likewise, the enjoyment body showcases its trademark luminosity and grand display as transcendent reality manifests into a transcendent pantheon. Its first two attributes connect to light: its essence as luminous awareness and its nature as being contained

²¹⁷ This is somewhat odd, given the Tibetan term *dmigs pa* is an active verb that also can mean to focus, to observe, or to visualize, and is often used in the context of focusing on sensory fields, either material or imaginary. In this context, I have translated the term as “attention” to highlight the quality of the awareness of reality, which can be considered a constant state of easeful attention.

within the domain of light. Its compassion is found in the sound of reality manifesting, and its cosmic field is adorned with all the jewels and ornaments associated with Buddhas in the form of the enjoyment body. The emanation body also is a manifestation of transcendent reality into pantheon, however in this case emanates into the mundane world for the benefit of beings. It is sensory in its essence – able to be perceived by sensing beings. However, it is not just one being, but an “indefinite” number of emanations emerging into the six realms of beings across the three times. It is unbiased in its approach to helping beings – all are worthy of its compassion. And it is not limited to just one cosmic field but emanates across many.

These three bodies, as described here, are presented as being foundational and resultant of the transcendent sounds of the elements and contemplative listening practices on them. Even though these descriptions are largely not evocative of sonic imagery, except for the enjoyment body’s compassion being found within the sound of reality, their inclusion at the outset of the discourse on these practices and as results of practice indicate their central importance to the core sonic contemplation in the *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra.

Chapter 4: Interpreting Transcendent Sonic Imaginations

In this analysis of the transcendent imaginations for the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, we will continue to inquire into the ways these texts are using sound to make philosophical claims regarding awakened ontologies, revelatory epistemologies, and transcendent cosmologies. I will argue that these three moves are central to both texts' projects of creating transcendent sonic imaginations, which ultimately is one of three pieces to creating religious affective atmospheres around sound.

We will trace the contours of both transcendent imaginations according to pivotal sonic organizations and discourses within Indian linguistic theory and Buddhism that inform these texts. These will demonstrate the ways sound is being used as an ontological touchstone to both create heuristic horizons for the texts and provide opportunities for creativity within them.

We will then follow the epistemologies of these traditions as they move from considering sound as a source of concealment to an instrument of revelation. This discussion will settle on the trio of awakened bodies which are used by both texts as key sites of revelation that present a fluid continuum of sonic transcendence from the abiding ground of reality to its appearance across vibrant pantheons.

Finally, these two categories of reality and pantheon will be further explored according to the ways both texts use them to chart out cosmological notions of transcendent beings within exterior organizations that arise from a foundational reality. Instead of the duo of exterior environment and interior beings discussed in the mundane sonic cosmologies, the transcendent cosmologies focus on abiding reality and appearing

transcendence, a pair that both differentiates from one another and joins together through sound. I contend that the transcendent imagination developed by these three discourses across both texts is the second half of a pair with its mundane counterpart.

These imaginations trace the distance between the suffering and confusion of the ordinary world and the bliss and clarity of transcendence. As affect is produced via the difference of two states, I argue that these imaginal descriptions of both states are written to be polestars, guiding the contemplative projects and affective atmospheres in these traditions. Through creating tone-setting sonic orientations and imaginative rationalities around transcendence, illuminating the awakened knowledge that sound can reveal, and envisioning new worlds that ruptures our own fixed cosmologies via divine sounds, these texts are establishing ‘expressed worlds’ which will overflow from contemplatively engaged soundscapes, creating atmospheres in which acoustic awakening is possible.

4.1 Transcendent Sonic Ontologies

We have already witnessed the ways that these two texts have based their ontologies of the mundane world in sound via the *Secret Matrix*'s letter index and the holistic rubric of the *Five Descents* for the *Unimpeded Sound*. I find that this pattern continues into the ontologies for the transcendent imagination of these texts as well. The use of the senses as foundational metaphors and frameworks for understanding transcendence and the divine can be found throughout a wide array of religions and senses, perhaps even more so than with mundane ontologies. A possible explanation might be that when thinking about a world we typically do not have access to, the divine, the senses can be a powerful imaginative tool that uses our own preceptory faculties – the primary if not only way we

experience anything else.

In addition, mystical experiences that can serve as the basis for philosophical inquiry are often sensory in nature.²¹⁸ From such experiences, sensory metaphors may filter into larger frameworks for thoughts, ultimately setting the broader tone of a philosophical orientation. As we discussed in the previous Part I, these background orientations when taken up in affective atmospheres structure the ways we perceive the world and act within it.²¹⁹ Like new works of art, metaphorical sensory ontologies of transcendence can establish new sets of coherences and ultimately new realities that are based on our natural dimensions of experience.²²⁰

We find a wealth of sensorially based ontologies of transcendence and the divine in other religious traditions, often those that also feature similar frameworks for their understanding of the mundane world. The temperature-oriented Tzotzil people describe their mundane world under categorizations of hot and cold, with hot signaling more power and virtue. This extends to the transcendent. Ritual language and individuals are considered hotter than their mundane counterparts, the ancient words of sacred song being the hottest of all language, ultimately valuing the sun as the supreme source of heat.²²¹ Studies of smell in Indian, Chinese, and Abrahamic religions attest to the potency of odor in literary and symbolic systems of organization that mark off sacred from

²¹⁸ In his preface to *The Presence of Light*, Matthew Kapstein notes that studies of light mysticism often take a perennialist approach that rebuts a purely cultural constructivist approach and grounds their explorations of religious experiences as innate human capacities. While Kapstein ultimately finds that this needs a constructivist corrective, he offers a balance between the views that takes seriously the phenomenological experiences of religious practitioners while remaining sensitive to cultural constructs and contexts.

²¹⁹ Andiloro, "This Must Be the Place," 209.

²²⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 235-236.

²²¹ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, 123-124.

profane smells,²²² types of smells that are pleasing to gods,²²³ and as rubrics for thinking about transcendent ideals such as purity.²²⁴ And sacred sound also ran throughout many Hindu traditions as a symbolic and interconnected network to consider the idea of transcendence.²²⁵

Light symbolism dominates the transcendent ontologies of many religions.²²⁶ The light-based meta-language of Illuminationist theories of Persia produce systematic ways of thinking about transcendent types of vision and the divine source incarnated as the Light of Lights.²²⁷ Neoplatonic mystics in Late Antiquity built theories of the divine based on “accepting the premise that divinity is a type of light, and . . . assuming that it behaves like the most familiar sort of light, sunlight.”²²⁸ And the Indian tantric commentator Abhinavagupta used light as an embedded argument throughout his discussions. His expansive light-based terminology permeated his symbolic vocabulary and could be found throughout his work, even if it wasn’t always fully articulated.²²⁹ In Tibetan Buddhism, light symbolism also permeates, especially in the Great Perfection, where darkness has been used as a sensory touchstone to consider the key philosophical concept of emptiness and visionary experiences of light were systematized to describe religious progress.²³⁰ This symbolism extends throughout the soteriological path,

²²² McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*, 241.

²²³ Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, “A Pleasing Odour for Yahweh: The Smell of Sacrifices on Mount Gerizim and in the Hebrew Bible” in *Sensual Religion*, 27-29.

²²⁴ Shawn Arthur, “Wafting Incense and Heavenly Foods: The Importance of Smell in Chinese Religion” in *Sensual Religion*, 48.

²²⁵ Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 7-11.

²²⁶ Kapstein discusses the possible reasons for this in his preface to *The Presence of Light*, xi.

²²⁷ Ziai, “Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light,” 26-28.

²²⁸ Sarah Iles Johnston, “*Fiat Lux, Fiat Ritus*: Divine Light and the Late Antique Defense of Ritual,” in *The Presence of Light*, 10.

²²⁹ Muller-Ortega, “Luminous Consciousness,” 45-52.

²³⁰ Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*, Chapters 4 and 5.

eventually leads to the ultimate accomplishment of the body dissolving into rainbow light.²³¹ In these traditions, light was a background set of orientations, vocabulary, experiential markers, and naturalist observations that were made into frameworks for considering transcendence.

We find the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* producing such sensorially based ontologies of transcendence. I argue that the work they are performing here is implicated in the larger developments of new background orientations and tones attuned to sound, both useful for establishing sonically based understandings of transcendence and creating affective atmospheres for their contemplative projects. In establishing these transcendent sonic ontologies, both texts are deeply informed by the sounds and larger sonic discourses of Indian and Tibetan language and religion. For the *Secret Matrix*, this is primarily seen in their use of the Sanskrit alphabet as the organizing principle for their letter index, following their use of it for their mundane ontology. The *Unimpeded Sound*, in contrast, thinks with the notion of awakened speech (*gsung*) as a touchstone for its ontology of transcendence.

4.1.1 Alphabetical Transcendence

The transcendent letter index of the *Secret Matrix* is arranged by letter family, marking the internal sonic logic of the alphabet as the primary organization methodology for their ontology of transcendence. However, while the short index follows the normal order of the alphabet, beginning with the ***Ka*** family, the longer list begins with the retroflex ***Ṭa*** family, and further with the second letter of that family, the aspirated ***Ṭha***. This is

²³¹ Matthew Kapstein, “The Strange Death of Pema the Demon Tamer” in *The Presence of Light*.

followed by the **Ta** family, again with the unvoiced aspirated letter coming first. This signals a slight departure from the alphabet's own structure in favor of the transcendent pantheon's structure. The palatal (retroflex) and dental **Ṭa** and **Ta** families are correlated with the primary male and female deities of the maṇḍala in consort pairs and are prioritized by the *Secret Matrix* due to this transcendent correlation.

Why these letter families were chosen as primary as opposed to the **Ka** and **Ca** families that normally begin the alphabet is not indicated in the text. However, it would make sense that the close connection between the palatal and dental **Ṭa** and **Ta** families, both in sound (which is almost indistinguishable for a listener whose language does not include that difference in sound – which the Tibetan language does not) and shape (as in Tibetan, the retroflex letters are written simply as the horizontally inverted version of the normal, in this case dental letters) informed their decision. Even if we were to limit ourselves to Sanskrit understandings of the alphabet, given the root text is most likely of Indian origin, while the shapes are different, the sounds of these two families are the closest of any two letter families in the alphabet, giving more prominence to a conceptualization of letters according to their sounds rather than their shapes. Pairing is one of the core aspects of the imagination of both transcendent pantheon, namely the union of the primary male and female deities, and of their mundane understandings of the world, namely the correlation between the essential aspects of living beings and of the material world (which ultimately is taken up in the service of collapsing that gap and achieving transcendence). Thus, we find the *Secret Matrix* creatively solving a dilemma between two organizing principles, the alphabet and the maṇḍala, ultimately resolving this by appealing to different sonic and visual aspects of the alphabet in order to keep

their intended transcendent structure.

Further, in considering the way that an empty reality can dynamically manifest into appearances, the *Secret Matrix* connects the linguistic logic of the letter *A* arising as the letters of the alphabet with the gendered logic of a female Buddha giving birth to the other deities of the maṇḍala. The text connects these two by remarking that “in the context of the ground, *A* is the natural ultimate all-ground. In the context of its perfected essence, it is Samantabhadrī.”²³² Context is important for understanding the different functions and manifestations of the letters in the index. Here, the contexts are transcendent reality and transcendent manifestation, in which we are presented with the female gendered Samantabhadrī (*kun tu bzang mo*), the Buddha most closely associated with transcendent reality. This is an interesting decision by the texts, as often the male version of Samantabhadra is used as the transcendent embodied form of the ground, or the two of them are in sexual union representing the coemergent union of appearance and emptiness.²³³

A likely explanation that follows the text’s understanding of the functionality of both the letter *A* and the female deity Samantabhadrī is that this letter-deity index is what generates all other letters and deities. As we have already seen, and which will be repeated over and over in the following letter-index section, *A* gives rise to all other letters of the alphabet following normative Sanskritic imaginations. Samantabhadrī, as the embodied manifestation of *A*, does the same: “*A* is the space of equality without

²³² *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 332.1-2.

²³³ This is typically a pair emphasized in Great Perfection traditions, rather than Mahāyoga traditions, however the lines between these often become blurred, as witnessed by the *Secret Matrix* tantra itself, which has commentarial and practice traditions according to both views.

cause or condition, the essence of Samantabhadrī... [and] from the unceasing dynamism of that, all Victors of the ten directions appear.”²³⁴ Thus, *A* and Samantabhadrī are the generative womb for the arising of all letters and deities of the maṇḍala, a feature that may have inspired the gendering of her as female. Regardless, throughout each of the letters-deity indexes, *A* as Samantabhadrī is witnessed to generate the deities, connecting each to the source of *A* – the resonance of transcendent reality that embodies as the primordial female deity, Samantabhadrī.

4.1.2 *A Basis of Awakened Speech*

The *Unimpeded Sound* uses the idea of awakened speech (*gsung*) to inform its sonic ontology of transcendence. We find this in its presentations of the awakening of the deities of its transcendent pantheon, all of whom speak the words of the *Unimpeded Sound* with their newly awakened speech and awaken their retinues. For example, “the god Great Viṣṇu ... speaks, teaching in his own sounds via blessings of the Buddha’s speech.”²³⁵ Here, awakened speech, or the Buddha’s speech, is shown to flow through Viṣṇu’s own voice, thus awakening himself and his entire retinue. In this way, later imaginations around the sound of Viṣṇu, Brahmā and the King of Kalapingkas are granted the authority and properties of the Buddha’s awakened speech, and thus carry ideological and reverential weight.

The primary location for discussions of awakened speech surrounds the imagination of the teacher’s voice or awakened speech, the final descent of transcendent sound. This is initially indicated in the listing of the sonic descents in the root verses, where it names

²³⁴ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 358.3-5.

²³⁵ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 65.6-66.1.

“the site of sound’s descent [as] fivefold: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Pingka bird, the elements’ sounds, and the teacher’s awakened speech (*gsung*).”²³⁶ In the introduction, the commentary links this awakened speech to the entire quintet of awakened attributes, noting that “there are 100 [words of] awakened speech that radiate from the awakened form of Tamers, 100 [words of] awakened speech that radiate from the awakened speech of Illuminators, and one hundred words of awakened speech that radiate from the awakened mind of Abiders. This collection of 300 [words] and the thirty words of taming with enlightened activities and the thirty words of the complete way of dynamic qualities, makes sixty more sounds.”²³⁷ This total of 360 sounds of awakened speech will remain relevant for discussions around this awakened speech of the teacher, though understood in different ways. However, the key point here is that all five attributes of awakening are expressed to beings via the sounds of awakened speech, marking speech as both the most relevant of the five attributes, while simultaneously imbued with the diverse capacities of all five.

Later, the commentary’s discussion of this descent of transcendent sound describes its treatment of the teacher’s awakened speech as “the teaching on measures for ascertaining the blessings that are reliant on engagement with the teacher’s awakened speech.”²³⁸ The section details not only how all Buddhas have and will become awakened based on the sound of the elements. It also describes how “they can teach in any kinds of sounds and words through possessing special qualities of teaching” through their awakened speech

²³⁶ *The Unimpeded Sound*, 18.

²³⁷ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 67.2-4.

²³⁸ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.1.

with a “‘melody’ [that] is harmonious and acts to engage to others.”²³⁹ The awakened speech of the teacher is thus described according to its capacity to sonically connect with a diversity of beings in aesthetically pleasing ways. This resonates with traditional accounts of the Buddha’s skillful means, in which he was renowned for his ability to speak to any one in words that would be impactful for them.

This capability is enhanced by the depth of the speech, as “in dependence on [the teacher’s] verbal expression, there will appear diverse understandings in the individual minds of beings, and thus in the maṇḍala of a single word, everything gathers in the state known as beyond [normal understandings of] sounds, words, and names.”²⁴⁰ Here, the melodic sound of awakened speech is granted the power to not just reach a multiplicity of beings, but to impart understandings that will benefit them all individually. Each sound uttered by awakened speech is said to contain the meanings of all phenomena of mundane existence and transcendence and thus transcends ordinary sound.

These sounds are finally described as affecting beings on sensory levels. “In reliance upon the abiding of sound arising as reality, the six senses such as the eyes and so forth of the six types of living beings are purified. Through that purity of senses, [beings] are linked [back] to that [sonic] reality.”²⁴¹ Due to the sound of teacher’s awakened speech emerging from sonic transcendent reality, the sixty sense capacities of all six types of beings are purified until they apprehend that same reality. These sixty sensory capacities, discussed in Part One on mundane imagination, reflect traditional Buddhist presentations on the sixty qualities of the Buddhas speech. Those sixty qualities are present in the

²³⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.5-6.

²⁴⁰ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.6-150.1.

²⁴¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 150.1-2.

Unimpeded Sound's commentary as well. It begins its first chapter (three short sections before its primary presentation on sonic imagination) with an overview of these sixty qualities of awakened speech. Thus, these sixty qualities inform the text's imagination on awakened speech and the impact it has on living beings. When these sensory capacities are multiplied across the six types of beings, we come to a total of 360 ways that the sounds of the teacher's awakened speech affect beings. This number connects back to the number of teachers that are in the world, and to the 360 melodies of the kalapingka bird that array across the body, speech, and mind of ordinary beings. Thus, we find that discourse around the awakened speech of a Buddha broadly shapes the contours of the *Unimpeded Sound*'s sonic imagination and ontological understandings of transcendence. This sets the background orientation implicit in their philosophical and contemplative projects, which ultimately combine in affective atmospheres that take up these sonically based orientations towards transcendence and color the experience of practitioners.

4.2 Revelatory Epistemologies of Sound

The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* apply these new sonic orientations towards transcendence to their epistemologies as well. The concealing nature of sound presented in their mundane imaginations was damning to the ordinary aural experience of individuals. But what if sound could reveal the truth as well? In order to set up their affective atmospheres, I argue that both texts highlight the distinction between these two opposing epistemologies – sound as concealing reality and sound as revealing it – to position the two poles of experience that will serve as the two states of difference needed

for the emergence of religious affect.²⁴² As “epistemic perspective can determine the nature and quality of emergent sound,”²⁴³ it is important that these texts delineate specific epistemologies of transcendence where sound reveals divine beings and the nature of reality, rather than obscures them. When the relevant sounds emerge in contemplative practice, then, they can be experientially understood as delivering knowledge of transcendence.

There are numerous examples of such transcendent epistemologies based on light. A mystical form of ‘abstract light’ is necessary for transcendent visionary experience in the Illuminationist theory of knowledge.²⁴⁴ Hindu devotees are granted sacred perception in order to see the divine, such as when Arjuna is given special eyes to see the theophany of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gita*.²⁴⁵ And Tibetan Buddhist visionary traditions describe “‘seeing’ emptiness... by the use of transcendent faculties of sight.”²⁴⁶ Mythological approaches are also used in Indian religion, such as in the Vedas where the invincible Indra breaks through epistemological concealment by killing the dragon Vṛtra in what Ganeri calls a ‘practice of truth.’²⁴⁷

However, sound and hearing have also long been considered core components of transcendent epistemologies in tantric philosophy and ritual practice for their capacities to reveal and deliver knowledge of divinities and reality. Mantras in particular are transcendentally oriented, containing divine power and going beyond the strictures of

²⁴² Anderson outlines the nature of affect in this way using Deleuze and Massumi in “Affective Atmospheres,” 78.

²⁴³ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 5.

²⁴⁴ Ziai, “Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light,” 37.

²⁴⁵ Eck, *Darśan*, 6.

²⁴⁶ Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*, 117.

²⁴⁷ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 1.

language towards a higher level of speech.²⁴⁸ Sanskrit is even considered divine in nature – the language of revelation. While its ordinary conventions may be a source of suffering, if one can apprehend the pure source of it, shown through mantric forms of speech, they can “reconnect with that source and... identify with the spontaneity, the creative autonomy, of the source of the Word.”²⁴⁹ In these tantric traditions, sound is thus conceived to originate from and reveal transcendent reality. As Abé notes in esoteric Japanese Buddhism, “every syllable used in dhāraṇi [in which mantra is a special class] was in fact a manifestation of the working of the Buddhist truth of emptiness. ... That is, even before the syllables are put together to form a word, they are already the sources of countless meanings capable of illustrating the truth.”²⁵⁰ These syllables are thus saturated with transcendent meaning and are considered primed to reveal that to practitioners who have the knowledge of Secret Mantra. Even when mantras contain non-linguistic syllables, they are imbued with such divine and primordial power.²⁵¹ They are instruments of transcendent revelation.

For our tantras, both texts contend that sound generates revelatory pathways to knowledge of a larger order of Buddhist divine pantheon and reality itself. These transcendent epistemological stances are demonstrated in these tantras as a combination of the dynamic ways reality arises and the array of new transcendent references that sounds signify. Reality is shown to abide and manifest along sonic pathways. Its transcendent appearances replace the mundane references that lead to delusion, revealing

²⁴⁸ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 4, 10.

²⁴⁹ Padoux, *Vac*, xii.

²⁵⁰ Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 6.

²⁵¹ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 2-3.

knowledge of their broader transcendent imaginations of sound which fill the minds of their audiences. Both texts primarily imagine these types of transcendent epistemology across the three awakened bodies and five awakened attributes which cross these divides of abiding and appearing modes of transcendence to consider awakening at all levels. Each presents new models of the revelation of transcendence to beings via sound. Thus, our investigation will remain with those core concepts to further understand the ways they are imagining the sonic and dynamic appearance of reality.

4.2.1 *The Reality Body*

The *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* both posit that sound reveals foundational reality often by using the imagination of the reality body (*chos sku*), the first component of the trio of awakened dimensions or bodies (*sku gsum*). This trio spans the entirety of a transcendent being, from their foundation in transcendent reality to their magical display and emanation in the world. The reality body may at times be represented by a Buddhist deity, which such as Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī, or it can be attained by practitioners on the Buddhist path. However, it is mostly associated with (and sometime synonymous with) the ground of reality. This makes strict divisions into reality and its transcendent appearance as the transcendent pantheon somewhat difficult, as an awakened being is said to exist on both levels. In broader tantric literature and in our texts, we find organizational systems that track this multiplicity or holism of an awakened being, including the three awakened dimensions and the five awakened attributes – body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities. In that categorization as well, the awakened mind is intimately tied to reality. Thus, the *Secret Matrix* connects the reality body with the awakened mind and letters, stating “the letters of the reality body are the awakened

mind... [Even] in their mere appearance, the nature of letters does not waver from the state of the mind itself and is inseparable from it. This itself is the reality body.”²⁵²

In the *Secret Matrix* tantra, we see how transcendent reality as the reality body revealed via the sounds of letters. The ground of transcendent reality, and thus the reality body, is always tied to the letter *A*: “*A*, which is the letter of the ground, path, and fruition, manifests as the reality body free from limits in the state of the inseparability of meaning and sign.”²⁵³ Not only is the reality body implicated with the letter *A*, but its description also as limitless aligns with the previous descriptions of the ground. This passage also outlines a sonic-linguistic interpretation of the nature of the reality body in that the expressed word (sign) and its meaning, a linguistic corollary to the ground (ultimate meaning) and appearance (its expression in the world) are inseparable within the dimension of reality. Thus, language’s normal grammatical function of sign illuminating meaning is used to show how sound can reveal reality.

The commentary further connects the letter *A* to the revelation of the reality body by presenting “letters awakening as the reality body, [whereby] the root text says “*A*, of emptiness and non-emptiness” and so forth. The letter *A* is beyond the limit of emptiness. The all-ground appears as the letter *A* which is the uninterrupted dynamic play of self-appearance in the space of mind.”²⁵⁴ It continues to detail how letters arising from *A* are awakened due to transcendent reality inherent in the root letter and “therefore, all phenomena that are signified by letters are also awakened. In the way of sesame seeds and sesame oil, all inner and outer phenomena reside in the essence of the reality body.

²⁵² *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 346.3-6.

²⁵³ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 344.2-3.

²⁵⁴ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 341.3-5.

Letters are like that, and therefore inside all letters and phenomena marked by letters, the essence of the Buddha resides.”²⁵⁵ Here, reality body aligns with the ground’s capacity to both abide without limitations and appear in vast multiplicity. This dual capacity of both the ground and the reality body is encoded onto the alphabetical soundscape by first connecting the letter *A* to the reality body, tracing the manifestation of reality body as *A* throughout letters and the phenomena they signify, and finally looping it back to conclude how the essence of the reality body resides within all letters.

The *Unimpeded Sound* focuses on the sonic revelation of the reality body in the context of the *Listening to the Elements* practice – the primary contemplative practice that takes up the fourth descent of transcendent sound discussed previously – the sound of the elements. The commentary maps each of the three awakened bodies onto listening practices for each of the elemental sounds, with the sound of fire being encoded with the reality body by stating, “now, third is the presentation on training on the sound of fire - connecting the yogic mind with the reality body.”²⁵⁶ While the practice on the sound of fire itself does not indicate a close connection to ideology of the reality body, other than its accomplishment, the rhetoric of the reality body aligns with the text’s descriptions of the transcendent ground in the introduction to the *Listening to the Elements* practice. Here, it explains that “the reality body’s essence is emptiness without limit. Its nature is pure attention. Its compassion is beyond any imposed frame. Its cosmic field is naturally pure.”²⁵⁷ This passage details the reality body according to four aspects that also map onto the transcendent ground, in particular emptiness, stainless awareness, limitlessness,

²⁵⁵ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 342.6-343.2.

²⁵⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 280.6-281.1.

²⁵⁷ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 274.3-4.

and natural purity.²⁵⁸ The other bodies are described sequentially, and their imaginations are mapped onto the other elemental sound, to which we will now turn.

4.2.2 *The Enjoyment Body*

The second dimension of awakened bodies revealed by sound is the enjoyment body (*long spyod kyi sku*). Awakened beings in their dimension of enjoyment are typically those visualized in maṇḍalas and depicted in thangka and mural paintings. They are colorful, adorned with jewel or bone ornaments, and luminous. They are not found in the material world but instead occupy a transcendent space between foundational reality and our ordinary world. Knowledge of them outside these depictions is typically considered within the contexts of esoteric practice, and often as visionary experiences.

The *Secret Matrix* begins its discussion of the sonic revelation of the enjoyment body by connecting it back with the foundational source of transcendence. Thus, reality or “*A* itself appears variously.”²⁵⁹ The commentary uses this idea to sonically imagine the enjoyment body in its glorious appearances. In a section detailing this awakened body, it first recalls the nature of *A* as transcendent reality and then quotes the root verse to describe how “reality itself is ascertained as the manifestly perfect Victor” which “is taught as the essence of the enjoyment body.”²⁶⁰ It locates the enjoyment body within the framework of the other two awakened bodies. The letter *A* is described here as the reality body free from limits and fixation. It also manifests as the emanation body that works for beings in continuous self-appearance. The commentary presents the enjoyment body as

²⁵⁸ This is reminiscent of a tripartite explanation of the ground within the Great Perfection – empty essence, luminous nature, and pervasive compassion. However, this both adds a fourth category, cosmic field, and continues the four-part system in both the enjoyment and emanation bodies.

²⁵⁹ The *Secret Matrix* 14.4.

²⁶⁰ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 344.2.

between these two, concluding that “these inseparable two bodies [of reality and emanation] are the complete enjoyment body. Because it is victorious over the dual limits of both unceasing and unfixating, it is called ‘Victor.’”²⁶¹ The commentary establishes its definition of the enjoyment body by combining the unfixated awareness of the reality body and unceasing self-appearance of the emanation body, both of which derive from manifestations of the letter *A*. The term “victor” is a common epithet for Buddhas and here refers to the awakened beings of the maṇḍala – the forty-two victors that map onto the forty-two letters of the alphabet. Thus, each of the Buddhas described in the transcendent pantheon of the letter index are considered to manifest as enjoyment bodies.

The *Unimpeded Sound*, instead, continues with its the elemental soundscape as the source of the enjoyment body’s sonic revelation. It returns to its four-part model of awakened bodies found in the introduction to *Listening to the Elements*, which in the root text is called “the stages of training for the three awakened bodies.”²⁶² The commentary again uses this as an opportunity to describe each of these three awakened dimensions in the context of its sonic imagination across four vectors: essence, nature, compassion, and cosmic realm. Here it details that “the enjoyment body’s essence is totally complete luminous awareness. Its nature does not extend beyond the maṇḍalas of light and spheres of light. Its compassion does not extend beyond the aurality of the natural sound of reality. Its cosmic field is a perfectly arranged ornamental realm.”²⁶³ This description calls upon traditional understandings of the enjoyment body as luminous and made of light, locating its essence and nature within a visual paradigm. However, it also connects

²⁶¹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 344.4.

²⁶² *The Unimpeded Sound*, 54.

²⁶³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 274.4-6.

this enjoyment body to the sound of transcendent reality. Instead of the letter *A*, the *Unimpeded Sound* finds the enjoyment body resounding from the “natural sound of reality,” its own sonic imagination of the ground of transcendent reality. Specifically, the commentary identifies this dimension of enjoyment as that foundationally transcendent sound’s aural aspect (*chos nyid kyi rang sgra’i rnam pa*). Thus, they push forward the claim that when audible sound resonates from the sound of foundational reality, transcendence is revealed as the enjoyment body.

4.2.3 *The Emanational Body*

The final awakened body revealed by sound in these texts is the emanational body (*sprul sku*), representing the transcendent pantheon acting in the world. The *Unimpeded Sound* presents another four-part definition for the emanational body: “the emanation body’s essence is made from the special sense fields. Its nature is indefinite. Its compassion emerges without bias. It appears and enters in various cosmic fields.”²⁶⁴ The emanation body is held to emerge pervasively across a myriad of worlds, building on its normative capacity to benefit diverse beings. Here, the sonic imagination around the emanation body’s revelation provides a sensory way for understanding this awakened dimension. These emanational bodies are based in “special sense fields” (*skye mched khyad par can*), and thus can be experienced via the senses as well. Following normative tantric understandings of the emanational body as appearing in our world, it makes sense that beings would have access to them via the senses. This is affirmed here, and the commentary adds that the sensory spheres that host these emanational beings are

²⁶⁴ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 274.6.

somehow distinctive and special. It does not clarify the term ‘special,’ but we find this term frequently used during the commentary’s presentation on the sound of the teacher’s voice, which deals in purifying the sense fields of living beings through special means of the teacher’s emanational bodies.

Further, the commentary highlights elemental sound’s capacity to connect a practitioner with the emanation body. The commentary opens a discussion on elemental sound by naming it “the presentation on closely planting the seed of the emanation body in reliance on the external locations of the sounds of the four elements.”²⁶⁵ Here, it is explicit that the primary awakened dimension tied with elemental sound is the emanation body. In continuing to describe “the sounds and meanings of those elements” according to pithy statements from the root text that describe the capacity of these sounds, the commentary writes that the sounds “‘acting heroically,’ means that they are acting to directly emit the potencies of the three-fold awakened bodies of the Buddha, and in particular, the power of the emanational body.”²⁶⁶ This passage makes clear that the sounds of the elements are transmitting the capacities of the three awakened bodies, which thus allows a practitioner to attain those qualities through listening to them. Hearing thus is shown as a pathway for gaining understanding, and abilities, of transcendence.

The sounds of the elements are presented by the text as having a special capacity to convey and give rise to the power of the emanational body. This aligns in certain ways with the text’s description of each awakened body and the nature of the elemental sounds.

²⁶⁵ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 144.1-2.

²⁶⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 145.1-2.

While the reality body exists in limitless emptiness, and the enjoyment body is found within the natural sound of reality's resonance, the emanation body plays out across the sense fields that are meant to be experienced by beings. The sound of the elements, while possessing transcendent features, is based in a material reality that connects the inanimate material world with the animate beings within. This strong link in the materiality and sensuality of both the emanation body and the sounds of the elements working across environments and beings points to the centrality of the emanation body for the *Unimpeded Sound's* sonic imagination of transcendence – it is the awakened dimension that most knowable in aural ways and we consequently find the text make a stronger epistemological stance regarding sound's capacity to reveal it.

The *Secret Matrix* tantra squarely places its sonic revelation of the emanational body in the domain of compassionate activity, stating that the letter *A* “manifests as the emanational body through performing whatever activities [are needed] for the sake of those to be tamed, though without ceasing in its self-appearances.”²⁶⁷ Here we find a definition of the emanation body that resonates with the *Unimpeded Sound's* – a combination of performing activities for the sake of beings without a predefined mode that would limit its capacity. Thus, its self-appearances are said to be endless. While the *Unimpeded Sound's* emanational body was transmitted by sound, this presentation of the awakened dimension of emanation occurs as a result of the letter *A*, the sound of transcendent reality, manifesting into the world.

The way this plays out and is made knowable in the world is through language. It is described in four primary ways within the commentary: awe, appearance, understanding,

²⁶⁷ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 344.3-4.

and activities. These four qualities of the emanation body are given as line commentary to the verse from the root text: “Amazing! These wonderful and superb great emanations, the forty-five named [letters], are the sites for the apprehension of words without exception [via which] various things and the great meaning are said and taught.”²⁶⁸

Amazing awe reflects in three ways on how letters are 1) “self appearing and unwavering from the space of reality;” 2) productive of all ritual and awakened activity, such that “all the enumerations of inviting the wisdom being, requesting to come, and offering are accomplished by letters and the quartet of pacifying, increasing, magnetizing, and wrathful activities are accomplished by letters;” and 3) correlated to transcendent forms of knowing, since just as a diversity of letters appear, “awareness is [also] self-appearing, the nature of the letter is the mind itself.”²⁶⁹ The letters self-appear from reality, as we have witnessed in their arising from *A*, just like the mind itself – our experiential awareness resting in that transcendent reality. The text here wants to both emphasize that the letters are emanating from reality, giving a basis for language to work in the world as the emanation body, and deliver an awe-filled affective reading of insight. It is an incredible feeling, they claim, to find that the things we say are intimately connected with reality.

The commentary clarifies that reality emanates as the “forty-two letters, as well as three [grammatical particles correlated] to method, wisdom, and space,”²⁷⁰ (or their inseparability,)²⁷¹ all of which comprise the forty-five great emanations. They are ‘great’

²⁶⁸ *The Secret Matrix*, 14.4-5.

²⁶⁹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 345.2.

²⁷⁰ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 345.3.

²⁷¹ The possible discrepancy here arises from descriptions of this connection in the letter index.

because their manner of appearance is “beyond the limits of appearance and emptiness. In unceasing self-appearing thusness, they are called ‘great emanations.’”²⁷² Thus, though they appear in the world, they are not bound by their appearances. Within language, these letters have the capacity to appear in a myriad of ways and mean a variety of things to different audiences, much like the previous description of the emanational body. They are manifest, but fluid and limitless.

Their function is to convey understanding. As “sites of apprehension,” the letters are shown to combine into words – “for example, by combining *Ka* and *Ba* you get *kaba* (pillar)”²⁷³ – which are the loci for the understanding of “all verbal conventions without exception... For example, if you say mundane existence, you understand it as something that has the characteristics of the complete torment of a perishable thing. If you say transcendence, you understand it as that which is free from samsara.”²⁷⁴ The commentary uses the holistic categories of the mundane world and transcendence and their nominal markers of mundane existence (Samsara) and transcendence (Nirvana) as evidence that everything can be understood through the language created by the emanations of letters.

Its activities perform a similar function. Emanation body as language is used to “speak of various things and teach the great meaning.”²⁷⁵ This diversity of verbal objects refers to anything within mundane existence or transcendence, from primordial gnosis to woodland critters. These can all be discussed through language. This awakened dimension of linguistic emanation also brings into clarity Buddhist tantric understandings

²⁷² *The Sun's Quintessence*, 345.3-4.

²⁷³ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 345.5-6.

²⁷⁴ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 345.6-346.1.

²⁷⁵ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 346.2.

of awakening as “in terms of great meaning, letters manifestly resolve the five omniscient bodies, the five primordial gnoses and so forth.”²⁷⁶ By using the emanation of letters within Buddhist teachings, practitioners are thus seen to be able to realize and access these foundational tantric truths and fruitions. In this way, the emanation body as language is again shown to be benefiting beings by widening their epistemological scope to mundane and transcendent truths.

4.3 Sonic Cosmologies of Transcendence

The third philosophical move both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras make in their transcendent sonic imaginations is cosmological. How can we understand the order, and even cosmogonical origin, of an unseen and unheard transcendent reality via sound? And how are the divine individuals who populate that level of reality empowered and arrayed by sound?

As with mundane cosmologies, transcendent ones are also often depicted via the senses. Classen, in particular, is keen to consider the kinds of sensory cosmologies cultures construct. In her case study of the temperature-minded Tzotzil, they consider a transcendent cosmology centered around the sun, which lights candles in the sky for humans when they are born, though once that candle is extinguished, they need additional heat to reach the afterlife.²⁷⁷ Sun-like light is at the center of Illuminationist cosmology as well, in which the rays of the supreme god of the cosmos, the self-radiating Light of Lights, spread out to the entire universe, and where it does not hit, evil resides.²⁷⁸

Transcendent cosmologies are also placed on visible and visitable landscapes, such as in

²⁷⁶ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 346.3.

²⁷⁷ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, 123.

²⁷⁸ Ziai, “Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light,” 26-28.

Hindu cosmologies wherein the peaks of the Himālayas are the abodes of the gods and the Ganges river descends from heaven.²⁷⁹

Sonic cosmologies themselves can be found throughout Indian Hindu and tantric traditions. Sound is the creative force of the universe according to the Vedas,²⁸⁰ and is considered in tantric theories to be the transcendent source from the energy of which the cosmos emanates.²⁸¹ Within the universe created from such sonic foundations, phonemes emerge and are correlated with categories of cosmic manifestation²⁸² and individualized centers of divine power in the forms of mantras and deities, whose very essence is mantra.²⁸³ We thus find a deep history of sonic cosmologies in Indian tantric literature that our texts both draw upon and creatively reimagine, ranging from conceptions of sonic foundational reality to its manifestations as a sonically infused pantheon.

In our texts' sonic cosmologies of transcendence, we find the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* map out Buddhist imaginations of foundational reality and its manifest pantheons across their corresponding soundscapes. While external environments are still operational for both texts, with the maṇḍala palace and the vertical cosmology surrounding Mt. Meru acting as transcendent environments, they appear more as organizing principles than sites for rich sonic imagination. The maṇḍala organization of the *Secret Matrix* arrays consort pairs of deities along a (mostly) flat plane that radiates out from the primary consort pair in the center. Mt. Meru is a vertical cosmology in which the individual abodes of deities mostly do not intersect.

²⁷⁹ Eck, *Darśan*, 5.

²⁸⁰ Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 16.

²⁸¹ Flood, "Introduction" to *Tantric Mantras*, ix.

²⁸² Padoux, *Vac*, xi.

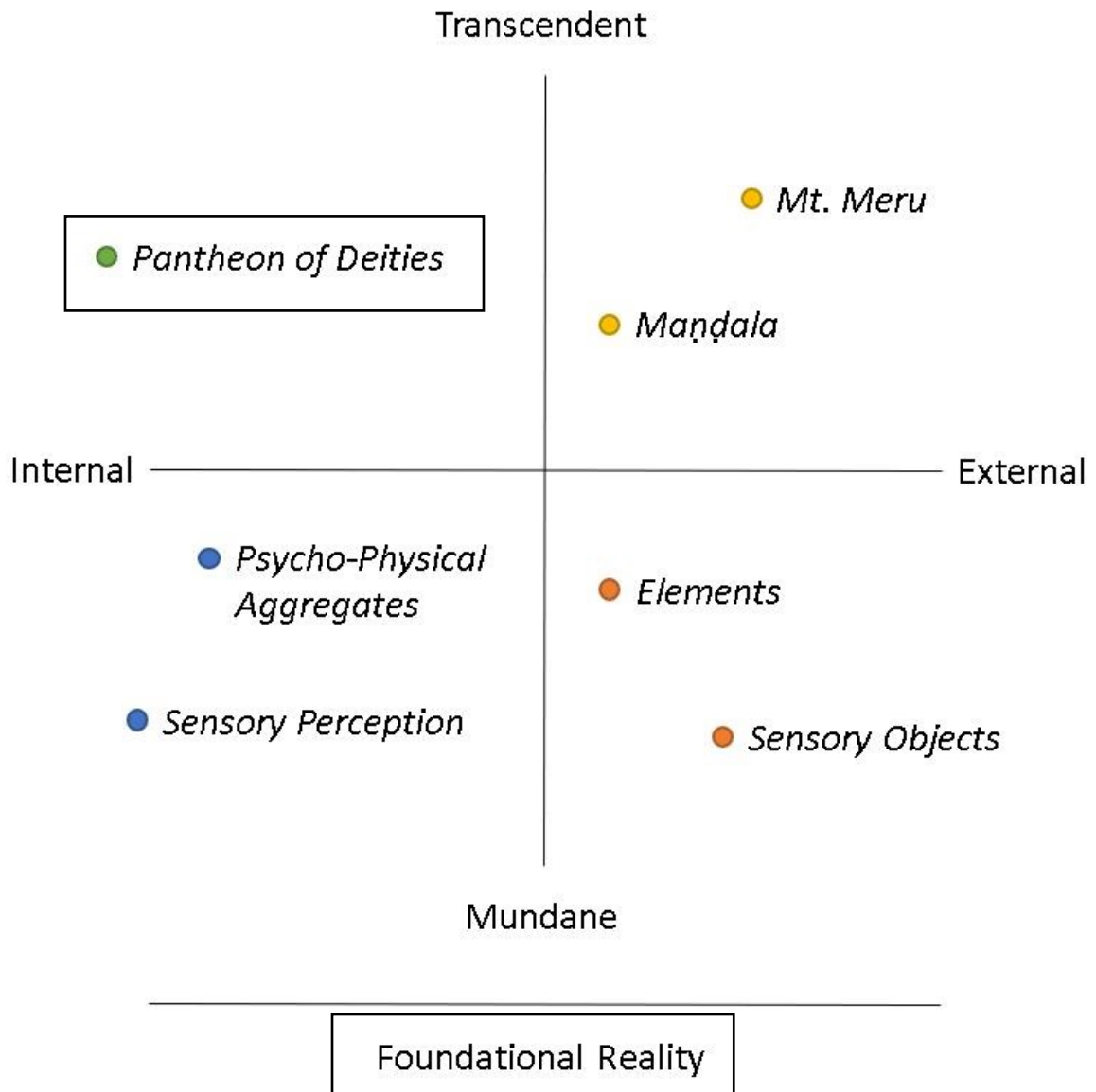
²⁸³ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 4-7.

These choices will have implications for their larger imaginative projects. More centrally to their imaginations though, is the divide between an abiding empty reality and its luminous melodic appearances. They thus seek to chart the foundation of reality and its manifestations in the forms of transcendent pantheons across their soundscapes. This allows them to sonically imagine the two sides of transcendence traditionally considered in Buddhist literature – an innate awakened nature and its actualization – and, in the language of affective atmospheres, prepare an expressed world to superimpose over the representational soundscape encountered by practitioners.²⁸⁴ As LaBelle reflects, sound installations operate “as a form of rupture onto the scene of the stable referent.”²⁸⁵ Combining this with an expressed world of imaginative rationality,²⁸⁶ such as these transcendent cosmologies put forward by our texts, can contribute to that rupture and allow for the emergence of new religious forms of affect. With this aim in mind, we will now attend to the particular ways the Secret Matrix and the Unimpeded Sound develop their transcendent cosmologies.

²⁸⁴ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 78.

²⁸⁵ LaBelle, “Sharing Architecture,” 184.

²⁸⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 235.



4.3.1 Transcendent Reality

The foundation for all transcendent pantheons and mundane worlds alike constitutes a significant cosmological imagination within Tibetan tantric Buddhism, a concern that we see play out in these texts as the authors invest their energies into describing the soundscapes of such transcendent realities in both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound*. These texts categorize their cosmologies of reality according to the philosophical

concept of the ground, or foundational reality (*gzhi*), a traditional and central Mahāyoga and Great Perfection understanding of transcendent reality. While it is often called “indescribable” and “inconceivable,” both traditions center their imaginations of it around descriptions of its sonic identity, often using the special sounds, the letter *A* and the so-called “natural sound of reality” as key signifiers of it.

In the *Secret Matrix* Tantra, the letter *A* is the sound of transcendent reality in the form of the ground. It is called “the letter *A* that signifies reality.”²⁸⁷ This reality is basis of all things and is described both in its abiding nature and in its capacity to manifest and subsume the diversity of phenomenal appearances in both transcendent and mundane realms. “The name ‘*A*’ is attached to the letter that shows reality.... If you take from the sound of ‘*A anu sarva dharmā*’ it shows ‘all phenomena are naturally pure.’”²⁸⁸ Here we are given these two aspects of the ground in Mahāyoga. The letter *A* signifies basic reality (*chos nyid*), while also being indicative of the transcendent reality’s presence within all phenomena as purity – a central marker to Mahāyoga’s ideation of this foundational reality.

This dual nature of the ground is found throughout the *Secret Matrix*’s discussions on *A* as transcendent reality, and descriptions of foundational reality are more often elicit both these abiding and appearing modes. This is represented in such pithy lines as “In the context of the ground, *A* is the natural ultimate all-ground. In the context of its perfected essence, it is Samantabhadrī.”²⁸⁹ The letter *A* is coded with both modes in this passage. It is both abiding as foundational transcendent reality and manifesting as transcendent

²⁸⁷ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 349.5

²⁸⁸ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 328.1-2.

²⁸⁹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 332.1-2.

pantheon, here as Samantabhadrī, the female half of the tantric coupling traditionally most closely associated with transcendent reality. She features prominently in the sonic explanation of this tantra thanks to her traditionally constructed gendered role of being both representative of foundational reality and having the capacity to give birth to the manifold appearances that arise from transcendent reality.

Reflections on *A* as transcendent reality are found both in theoretical discussions on the ground, as well as discussions that refer to contemplative practices. The earlier quote features a ubiquitously used Sanskrit mantra, “*A anu sarva dharmā*,” at the beginning of Mahāyoga tantric ritual liturgies. In the description of the visualization practice on white *A*, it is identified as transcendent reality by different names: reality (*chos nyid*), awakened mind (*thugs*), the essence of self-appearances (*rang snang gi ngo bo*), and that which shows reality. It also has other Mahāyoga attributes of transcendent reality, described as being free from limits and impurities.

However, the sonic manifest capacity of *A* is also central to the commentary’s claims of *A* as transcendent reality. Having made the argument that all phenomena were merely nominal characteristics, the commentary reads that “*A* itself diversely appears as the forty-two letters beginning with *Ka*. It contains everything with sounds and names. That very king of perfect manifestation is ascertained.”²⁹⁰ Not only does the Sanskrit linguistic idea that all letters contain the vowel *A* hold true, but this is also mobilized to suggest that all things that are mistakenly distinguished according to the sounds and names that come from these alphabetical letters are also contained within the sound of *A*. Both the mundane world and the transcendent pantheon are described as being contained within

²⁹⁰ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 329.5-6.

the realm of the sound *A*, since they are identified by sound and name.

This works on the level of the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy which the commentary references early in the chapter. It argues that emptiness can be understood from a linguistic standpoint. By removing names and linguistic conventions that mistakenly substantiate and separate phenomena, things could be understood according to their empty nature. In addition, each letter of the alphabet is encoded with both a holistic accounting of the mundane world and the entirety of the *Secret Matrix* transcendent pantheon. In a very literal way for this system, all the phenomena of the ordinary and transcendent are subsumed by these letters, all of which, the passage reminds us, are borne from the letter *A* – transcendent reality. This is echoed as an explanation for our experience of the world – whether mundane or transcendent: “From among these letters, *A* is placed at the beginning of everything. All syllables emerge from *A*. Thereby, it is ascertained as the cause for all letters. The forty-two resultant victors appear by realizing the space of reality signified by *A*. [In contrast,] the forty-two thoughts of samsara appear by not realizing it.”²⁹¹ For each letter of the alphabet that emerges from the transcendent reality of *A*, beings can either experience the maṇḍala of transcendent pantheon, or the multitude of deluded appearances in the mundane world.

The letter index further exemplifies the way *A* functions as transcendent reality. There, transcendent reality operates in both dimensions of abiding and manifesting. It abides as “unborn suchness,” a term used for transcendent reality since it neither arises from anything nor can it be captured in description other than by pointing to or “that itself” or “suchness” (*de nyid*). This description is constantly referenced for each of the

²⁹¹ *The Sun's Quintessence*, 353.6-354.2.

letters in the index. It manifests in three ways – letters, mundane concepts, and transcendent deities. The members of each category are described as appearing from and being subsumed by transcendent reality as the letter *A*. The primary Buddha of the *Secret Matrix*'s maṇḍala, Akṣobhya, is thus shown arise from *A* and its personification as Samantabhadrī. All letters contain this inherent *A*. Mind is signified by *A* and contains all forty-two concepts that comprise the mundane world. And all the deities of the transcendent pantheon come from Samantabhadrī, the essence of all the Buddhas, who is herself the letter *A*. For example, in the letter index of retroflex *Ṭha* it reads: “In the context of the resultant deity, from the dynamism of the unobstructed Samantabhadrī, who is signified by *A*, the totally pure eight collections of consciousness appear as Akṣobhya.”²⁹²

The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra also considers the ground of transcendent reality according to sound, but decides to encode those ideas onto a non-descript “natural sound of reality” (*chos nyid kyi rang sgra*) rather than a particular sound such as *A*. Thus, the commentary begins its introduction by stating “all phenomena of appearance and resonance (sights and sounds) emerge as the natural sound of reality.”²⁹³ It then proceeds to provide theoretical explanations for sound as transcendent reality in a two-fold depiction of how reality as sound abides: within the tantric body and as emptiness.

Within the energy channels of the human body, sound takes three forms – light, letters, and deities. Sound as light shows the defining characteristics of the mind (*sems kyi mtshan nyid*), which is to say its true awakened nature. Sound as letters forms the

²⁹² *The Sun's Quintessence*, 359.6.

²⁹³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 7.5.

foundation for linguistic expression. And sound as the deity consort pair of Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri is the basis for all transcendent beings within the pantheon, an echo of this pair's foundational importance in the *Secret Matrix*. These sounds are said to “vibrate [in the channels.] Thus [there is] so-called ‘emptiness through vibration.’” Emptiness is a central component to Buddhist ideas about foundational reality, linking vibrational qualities of sound in these three forms to their basis in transcendent reality. It continues by explicitly claiming that “reality is pure vibrational emptiness – the pure natural abode of that to be expressed.”²⁹⁴ Sound as vibration or movement (*'gyu ba*²⁹⁵) is again used to link it with the emptiness of transcendent reality, though unfortunately no further explanation on the logic behind this connection is given.

To further illustrate sound as transcendent reality, the commentary uses the sounds of the Sanskrit and Tibetan titles of the *Unimpeded Sound* as a focal point around which their sonic imagination of transcendent reality coalesces, claiming that “the syllables of the words in the title accord with the meaning of reality.”²⁹⁶ Each of the Sanskrit syllables of the title causally relates in some way to the ground of transcendent reality, such as “[The title says] *Sva*, because the abiding mind itself simply arises from the

²⁹⁴ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 8.5-6.

²⁹⁵ The Tibetan term *'gyu ba* generally translates to movement rather than vibration. It is possible that this too is indicating movement or travel, such as sound travelling through the channels or the movement of sound going from the interior to the exterior as a way to consider verbal expression, though in the subsequent section on expression itself, this term is not used. I have chosen to use vibration here since the other major Tibetan term to indicate vibration, *gyo ba*, often has a negative connotation, such as the fault of wavering (*gyo ba*) attention. Here, this is obviously a positive statement describing the sonic nature of transcendent reality, and it is possible that the authors would want to use a separate term to distinguish this positive valence. That being said, The *Secret Matrix* tantra does use *gyo ba* to indicate sonic vibration when it describes the world being broken down into its nominal characteristics. Unfortunately, the *Unimpeded Sound* does not return to this idea and further research into ideas of sound in the 12th century in Tibet are needed to fully understand how they consider the physical vibrational properties of it.

²⁹⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 109.6.

ground.”²⁹⁷ It is as if transcendent reality itself is manifesting the sounds of the tantra’s title. Reasons given range from descriptions of the nature of mind, the appearing mode of the ground, the ways those appearances manifest as transcendent qualities but can cause confusion if misunderstood, the ground’s relation to the three awakened bodies or dimensions, and the ways one can be freed into transcendent reality including references to the visionary experiences of the *Direct Crossing* practice which is traditionally considered the fastest path within the Great Perfection. All these factors thus produce the sounds of the title, which in turn are considered as instrumental to achieving freedom from suffering, and “thereby deliver one to the essence of ultra-pure awareness.”²⁹⁸

The sounds of the Tibetan title are further considered symbolic of transcendent reality. These explanations use logical reasoning to arrive at a symbolic etymology for each of the title’s words. In particular, the commentary imagines the word “sound” in the title with emptiness. In a somewhat circular form of logic, the passages take incremental steps from the word’s symbolic meaning and how it relates back to the word itself, though not always in self-evident ways. In this case, sound symbolizes activities and designations – the things verbal sound can do and the things it linguistically references. It further shows how activities are empty in nature since they are impermanent and thus are like transcendent reality. This in turn is the reason it is termed “sound.” While the logical conclusions of this passage appear somewhat disjointed, it does provide us yet another example of how the text is working (and sometimes bending backwards) to ensure that sound is encoded with cosmological ideas of transcendent reality.

²⁹⁷ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 9.4.

²⁹⁸ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 109.6.

4.3.2 Transcendent Pantheon

Second, we find that these traditions use sound to generate an array of divine individuals who populate their transcendent cosmologies. These transcendent pantheons for both texts represent the ways that foundational reality manifests into the world as awakened beings. This is reflected in the letter *A* giving way to the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding deities and reality's natural sound descending into the world through five transcendent pathways. The core of the transcendent pantheons for both the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* are the deities themselves. These are the forty-two deities presented in the letter index for the *Secret Matrix* and four of the five sources of sound in the world. Discussions of awakened bodies and awakened attributes serve to describe the nature and function of these transcendent beings, not only making them visible and audible, but investing them with transcendent capacities. One can interact with them, make requests of them, witness their transformations, feel how they transform us, merge with them, and listen to their sounds.

These two textual traditions take dramatically different pathways in choosing and arranging the deities of their pantheons. Both texts fill their pantheon with individually named deities who are imagined according to their soundscapes. Each of the members of the *Secret Matrix* pantheon is given (typically) a Sanskrit name, identifying them according to their individual histories within Indian Buddhist tantra. Brahmā and Viṣṇu also possess Indian pedigree, though in Hinduism, and are converted to Buddhist causes in the *Unimpeded Sound*. The King of Kalapingkas is an anthropomorphized and apotheosized representative of the mythical bird. And while the teachers are not named individually, they are given classification names such as “Tamers.”

The *Secret Matrix* arranges its transcendent pantheon along the organizational

principles of the Sanskrit alphabet. It groups classes of deities, such as the primary male and female Buddhas, the inner and outer bodhisattvas, the gatekeepers, and so forth according to letter families of the alphabet. And it connects those groups in consort pairs, such that their corresponding mundane concepts of environments and living beings are paired. Thus, the primary five male Buddhas correlated with the five psycho-physical aggregates of living beings are the consorts of the five primary female Buddhas who align with the five elements of the material environment. They are imagined in the shape of an alphabetical wheel.

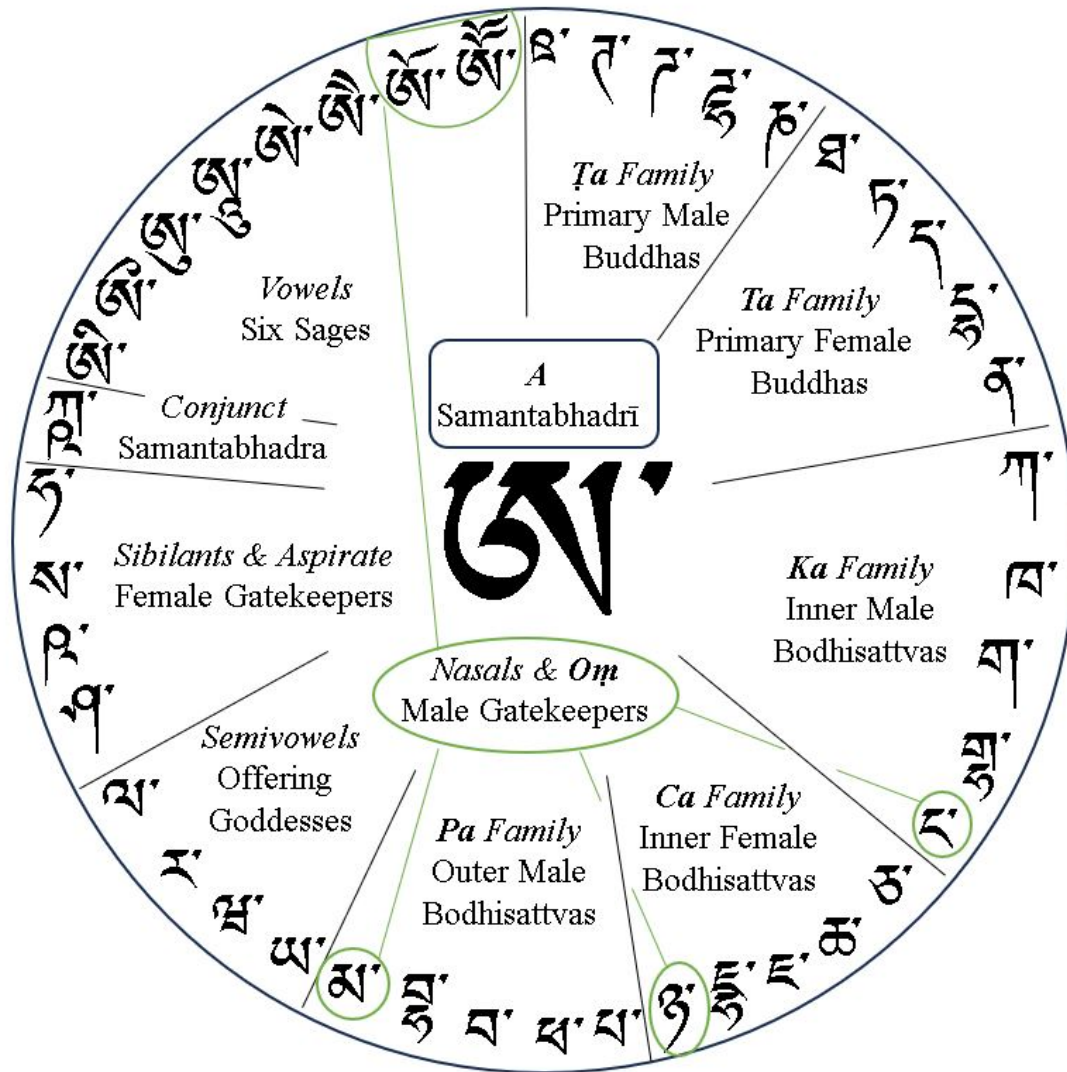
The *Unimpeded Sound* instead uses a traditional Mahāyāna cosmological organizational metaphor of Mt. Meru, the central mountain to the universe. Three members of its transcendent pantheon, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the King of Kalapīngkas, are arrayed vertically up the mountain. Each descends into its position individually and does not interact with the others. The teachers are discussed according to their multiplicity rather than spatial locations. The elements are the only source of sound that is not deified or anthropomorphized. They descend into the natural world²⁹⁹ and are then taken up in the bodies of beings. Thus, we find a set of individual deities of the transcendent pantheon who are considered according to vertical descent and along a vertical axis of a mountain cosmology.

²⁹⁹ Their cosmological presentation is organized according to birth types of beings, including those from a womb, those born from an egg, those born from heat and moisture, and those born miraculously. This organization seems to have little bearing on the overall sonic imagination, as all these sources of sound are available to humans, even though we are not born from in these other ways. They appear to simply be an organizing principle for the discussion, with some thematic crossover. In this case, I would argue that the sounds of the elements' descent into the abode of animals and so forth who are born from eggs, can be considered as a reference to the natural world.

4.3.2.1 Unified Mandala Organization

The *Secret Matrix* tantra contains forty-two deities in its peaceful transcendent pantheon,³⁰⁰ arranged within a maṇḍala structure. These flow from and are indexed according to the forty-two letters of the alphabet and the forty-two concepts of the mundane world. It describes the structure of the alphabet and its corresponding deities as a wheel. In this appearance, the letters of the alphabet continuously manifest for beings as the wheel is a continuous shape. Also, like the slicing blade of Indian wheel-shaped *cakra* weapons, this wheel cuts through delusions, purifying the forty-two concepts of the mundane world into their pure forms of the forty-two deities.

³⁰⁰ There is also a wrathful pantheon for the text, but it is outside the scope of this dissertation.



These deities will come to populate a single radial maṇḍala in the shape of a palace following Mahāyoga tantric paradigms. In that organization, all the deities relate to each other, either as consort pairs or as directionally defined coordinates within the larger maṇḍala map (i.e., a deity in the East or Southwest is defined by its directional relationship to the central consort pair of deities). Here too, they represent a unified system of deities, reflecting their singular organizing principle of the Sanskrit alphabet. This organization will be further discussed in Part Three.

The root text in the fourth chapter only alludes to the identities of these deities, for

example referring to the primary deities of the maṇḍala by their family names such as ““*Ṭha* is Adamantine Magical Emanation”” and ““*Ḍa* is Wish-fulfilling Magical Emanation””³⁰¹ referring to the Akṣobhya of the Adamantine family and Ratnasambhava of the (wish-fulfilling) Jewel family. The commentary, however, is more explicit. It provides two lists of the maṇḍala deities – a short index based on the simple recounting of the alphabet in the root verses, and a longer explanation of this index as commentary to the root verses’ own process of correlating sounds to deities as seen above. The general information of the letter-concept-deity correlation in both of these lists is the same, so I will focus my attention here on the longer explanations of the index. However, it is important to note that the commentary seems to be highlighting the connection of named deities to the letters of the alphabet by providing a straightforward index schema outside the strict explanation of the root verse. In this way, this shorter list acts almost as a crib-sheet that one could pull out for easy reference.

In both iterations of the lists, the letter *A* initiates the alphabet. As discussed previously, *A* is associated with the ground of transcendent reality. However, it also takes a divine embodied form as Samantabhadrī, the female Buddha most closely associated with foundational reality. As all letters manifest from the letter *A*, so do all the other deities of the *Secret Matrix*’s transcendent pantheon emanate from her. Each of these letters is encoded with a transcendent imagination of individual named deities. For instance, the first letter index around retroflex *Ṭha* indicates that for the root verse, ““*Ṭha* is Adamantine Magical Emanation itself”... In the context of the resultant deity, [this means that] from the dynamism of the unobstructed Samantabhadrī, who is signified by

³⁰¹ The *Secret Matrix*, 15.2-3.

A, [*Tha*, as] the totally purified eight collections of consciousness, appears as Akṣobhya.”³⁰² This basic structure is used for each description of the deities in the letter-index. Each letter appears as a named deity of the *Secret Matrix* transcendent pantheon, emerging from *A* and its embodiment as Samantabhadrī. Each deity’s description also contains commentary clarifying the naming system within the root verses. For example, Akṣobhya is the primary deity of the Adamantine awakened family, and thus the term ‘Adamantine’ given in the root verse is explained in the commentary as an “unchangeable essence” derived from purification of the eight collections of consciousness that correspond with *Tha* in the context of mundane concepts.

The overall layout³⁰³ in the root verses and commentary is structured according to both the letter families and types of transcendent deity. These begin with the primary male and female consort pairs of the maṇḍala mapping onto the palatal *Ṭa* and dental *Ta* letter families: the male deities Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi; and the female deities Samantabhadrī (who is both used as the deity of transcendent reality and the main female consort embodying the letter *Tha* and the purified element of space), Buddha Locana, Mamaki, Pandaravasini, and Tara. These are followed by two other quartets of bodhisattva consort pairs. The inner bodhisattva pairs feature the male bodhisattvas mapped onto the *Ka* family – Kṣitigarbha, Avalokiteśvara, Ākāśagarbha, and Vajrapani. The inner female bodhisattvas are mapped onto the *Pa* family – Lasyema, Malema, Girtima, and Nirtima. The outer bodhisattva pairs consist of the male bodhisattvas who correspond to the *Ca* family – Maitrya, Nirvirana-

³⁰² *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 358.6-359.6.

³⁰³ *Appendix, Figure 2: Full Letter Index* contains a full reference chart for these correspondences.

Vishkambin, Samantabhadra (in his bodhisattva form), and Manjusri. The offering goddesses are their female consorts correlating to the semi-vowels *Ya*, *Wa*, *Ra*, and *La* – Dhupema the incense goddess, Metogma the flower goddess, Marmema the butter lamp goddess, and Drichabma the scented water goddess. The nasal members of these letter families (*Nga*, *Nya*, and *Ma*, as well as *Om* – *O* and *Au* combined) comprise the wrathful male gatekeepers of the four directions: Yamantaka, Great Power, Hayagriva, and Amṛta Kundali. The sibilants *Śa*, *Ṣa*, and *Sa*, as well as the aspirate *Ha* correspond to their female consorts: Angkusha the Iron Hook Lady, Pasa the Noose Lady, the Iron Chain Lady, and the Bell Lady. *Kṣa* is related to Samantabhadra, who also appears twice in the maṇḍala, this time reflecting his function within transcendent reality and the purity of mind. The rest of the vowels corresponded to the six sages that emanate across the six realms for the benefit of beings there. *I* is the Tamer of Gods, *Ī* is the Tamer of Titans, *U* is the Teacher of Humans, *Ū* is the Lord of Animals, *E* is the Conqueror of Tormented Spirits, and *Ai* is the Conqueror of Hell-beings.

4.3.2.2 Individual Vertical Descents

The *Unimpeded Sound* does not feature quite as many named deities as the *Secret Matrix*, nor does it share anywhere near the organizational precision of it. However, there are several named figures of central importance to its sonic imagination of transcendent pantheon – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the King of Kalapingkas.³⁰⁴ These three non-Buddhist deities³⁰⁵ comprise three of the five descents of transcendent sound into the world. These

³⁰⁴ The teacher is not named nor placed on this map but is described according to several roles that they fill such as “Tamer,” “Illuminator,” and “Abider” based on the awakened attributes they use.

³⁰⁵ While the kalapingka bird can be considered a class of mythical being renowned for its voice, in this case, the kalapingka bird is being considered a deity. This is for two reasons. First, the narrative description for the awakening of the *Unimpeded Sound*’s transcendent pantheon refers to it as “The King

correspond to two Hindu deities and a type of mythical bird whose song is renowned for its transcendent beauty. All three are positioned within a vertical map of Mt. Meru. While these figures inhabit a similar space, they are not presented as a unified whole, but rather as several distinct figures occupying different parts of that vertical mountain cosmology and with different spheres of influence.

The introductory framing scene lays out a cosmological view of Mt. Meru and the many deities who reside therein. The passage begins with brief descriptions of gods who reside in multi-storied abodes running up the central mountain of the cosmos – Mt Meru. This list follows normative Mahāyāna explanations of vertical cosmology in which eighteen houses are stacked with many fathoms of space in between, featuring a traditional Indian Buddhist cast of characters and places including tree-spirits, vampires, earth protectors, roaring titans, the lords of the four directions, the heaven of the thirty-tree gods, and Tushita heaven. While many of these beings are ‘gods,’ they are still considered part of the mundane world.

Brahmā resides above these eighteen houses, at the top of Mt Meru. He is considered one of the foremost gods of the (mundane) universe. He is depicted with an immense retinue that is directionally and sonically labeled as melodious fields resounding with “joyful music... playful music... [and] blissful music.”³⁰⁶ Brahmā sits in the center and “from his innumerable faces... emerge words of melodious sound.”³⁰⁷ These descriptions

of Kalapingkas,” an individual representative who has become transcendent and who frees their retinue with their awakened melody. Secondly, in the description found in its own section within the Five Descents, it references a sage who took on a feathered bird form and sang the melodies of the kalapingka that initiated their emergence in the body, speech, and mind of living beings. This also indicates a single transcendent figure, who I am relating to the King of Kalapingkas referenced in the previous section.

³⁰⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 63.6-64.1.

³⁰⁷ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 64.4.

are reminiscent of maṇḍala structures, whereby Brahmā is situated as the lord over his domain. Thus, he is rendered in ways that resemble familiar Buddhist organizations of transcendent spaces. In addition, his voice is already heard beautifully resounding through the cosmos. However, the commentary makes this transcendent with a short narrative interjection by the Buddha.

“The perfect authentic Buddha sends out Shiva... from whose mouth emanates the pure resonance of the variegated Brahmā melody, whereby the root of all scriptures, this *Unimpeded Sound* tantra... is spoken from the state of limitless meditative concentration.”³⁰⁸ The Buddha mobilizes another well-known non-Buddhist tantric deity, Śiva, to act as his voice, reciting this tantra itself in both melodious and harsh sounds. He is joined by the rest of the beings there, as “from the mouths of Brahmā’s limitless retinue as well, these words self-emergently emerge, whereby (all the beings in Brahmā’s world all at once become Buddhas, and they keep cyclic existence from reappearing.” As the sounds of this tantra spontaneously resound from this immense divine choir, Brahmā and all of his retinue are awakened, thus made members of the transcendent pantheon through sound. In addition, “these words (of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra) self-emergently emerge as the self-sound of reality in the sky between the stacked houses. Thereby, the physical beings who reside inside the stacked houses from before also attain the result of Buddhahood spontaneously.”³⁰⁹ Not only are all beings in the cosmology of Mt. Meru awakened via these sounds, but the commentary also links the sounds back to the ground of transcendent reality, naming them as “the natural sound

³⁰⁸ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 64.6-65.3.

³⁰⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 65.4-5.

of reality.” Thus, Brahmā, an already well-renowned and melodious orator in tantric Buddhism, is infused with the sound of transcendent reality, whereby he is both awakened and his speech transforms, now resonating with this power of awakening.

The commentary uses this narrative technique twice more for Viṣṇu and the King of Kalapingkas, though with slightly different emphases. Viṣṇu, residing within a cavity of Mt. Meru, “speaks, teaching in his own sounds via blessings of the Buddha’s speech... uttering this (*Unimpeded Sound*) itself into words.”³¹⁰ Again, the Buddha’s voice, now explicitly linked to the awakened attribute of speech, flows through this non-Buddhist deity, though in Viṣṇu’s own distinct sounds. What emerges is the sounds of the tantra, which were already demonstrated to be the sounds of reality, which again cause “Viṣṇu and his retinue [to] attain Buddhahood.”³¹¹ With this, Viṣṇu officially joins the ranks of the transcendent pantheon for the *Unimpeded Sound*’s sonic imagination, and his distinctive sounds carry the ideological weight of awakened speech, the sound of transcendent reality, and the capacity to awaken beings who hear it.

Last, the King of the Kalapingka birds, descends from the space above Mt. Meru into an “immeasurable mansion that has 7,200,000 [stories],” and sings with “sonic-melodies [that] are sounds called completely frontal, faithful, and highly elaborate, through which the teaching [of *Unimpeded Sound*] is taught.”³¹² The commentary again evokes transcendent maṇḍalas, using a palatial image. The term “immeasurable house” (*khang pa gzhal du med pa*) is a variation on a common tantric royal palace setting for the maṇḍala of a Buddha, including that of the *Secret Matrix*. In this abode, the King of

³¹⁰ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 65.6-66.1.

³¹¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 66.1-2.

³¹² *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 66.3-4.

Kalapingka's does what his mythical namesake is known for in Buddhist mythology and sings an elaborate and beautiful song. Like the sounds of Brahmā and Viṣṇu before him, this sound delivers the sound of transcendent reality in the form of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra in this soon-to-be transcendent being's distinctive way, thereby causing "the King of Kalapingkas with its retinue [to] attain the result of Buddhahood spontaneously."³¹³

This follows the same progression as the previous two tales of awakening, this time emphasizing the manner in which awakening occurs from sound. Here, beings are awakened spontaneously from listening to transcendent sound, a core feature of Great Perfection soteriology.

The *Five Descents of Sound* also presents imaginations of these named figures. The beginning of each discussion on these three descents features a brief synopsis of what makes these three deities transcendent and thus able to emit transcendent sounds into the world. Brahmā's sound begins by recalling his transcendent narrative from the introduction, naming him "Great Brahmā, [whose] abode is [atop the] Multi-Storyed Houses, and through whose sound everything arises as reality."³¹⁴ In addition to reminding the reader of his place atop Mt. Meru and the way that he and all the beings below him became transcendent through awakened speech, the texts also connects him and his sound to the ground of transcendent reality. Since through his sound, all phenomena arise as reality, the commentary draws a direct line between the imagination of the self-sound of reality to the sounds of the transcendent pantheon. Further, to ensure that the audience understands what kind of deity Brahmā is in this context, the

³¹³ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 66.4.

³¹⁴ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 111.1-2.

commentary clarifies that “‘Brahmā’ refers to the Great Brahmā of dynamic qualities, which is the special basis that makes the emanations of the Buddhas emerge.”³¹⁵ As the sound of transcendent reality manifests into the world via Brahmā’s sounds, so too does the awakened dimension of emanation theorized previously become activated in conjunction with his dynamic qualities (*yon tan*), which themselves are indications of his awakened status given their place within the five awakened attributes. Thus, this named deity’s sonic activities are encoded with ideological and narrative imaginations of both transcendent reality and multiple aspects of transcendent pantheon.

Likewise, Viṣṇu’s sound is described as possessing transcendent properties and capacities in a variety of spheres that he is said to ‘pervade.’³¹⁶ His transcendent sounds pervade the elements of the material world, beings’ bodies, verbal expression, speech, and minds. By pervading these aspects of the world, “appearances are linked to reality... the body is free from sickness and suffering... there is recitation of the inexpressible which is the nature of all sounds and words... one becomes learned in the experiential precepts on the combinations of words and meanings via the garlands of vowels and consonants... [and] one hundred thousand meditative absorptions are born in one session.”³¹⁷ In this way, Viṣṇu’s sound is described as having the potency to transcend the ordinary limits of these five spheres. The appearances of the material world are seen as the nature of reality, physical shortcomings are overcome, the ‘inexpressible’ nature of reality comes through the sounds of one’s voice, complex Buddhist knowledge systems based in linguistic communication is attained, and one is able to rest in deep states of

³¹⁵ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 111.2-3.

³¹⁶ This is a play on the etymology of Viṣṇu’s name, “The one who pervades and engages.”

³¹⁷ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 122.2-5.

contemplation. Thus, Viṣṇu's sound is encoded with understandings of transcendent reality as both the coemergent union of appearance and emptiness as well as its sonic expression. In addition, his sound is imagined via ideas of the awakened body, speech, and mind of transcendent pantheon, which possess unmarred physical forms, the ability to communicate Buddhist pathways of knowing, and a mind that abides within reality.

Third, the King of the Kalapingka birds is described as “a sage who possesses the super-knowledges and who emanates in a great feathered form.”³¹⁸ The super-knowledges (*mngon shes*) are held to be some of the results of sonic practice within this text, and thus a sage (already a term reserved for realized individuals) is elevated via their attainments. After emanating in this bird form, “it emits its [transcendent] sound ‘*ka hring*’ from which three hundred and sixty melodies emerge: initially, these [emerge as] diverse emanations of awakened bodies, from which arise one hundred and twenty special aspirations which are causes [for future beings].”³¹⁹ The variegated and melodic sound of the King of Kalapingkas is said to emanate awakened bodies, language that evokes both the dimension of emanation and the awakened body itself from the trio of body, speech, and mind. This sonic emanation initiates a process whereby transcendent sound becomes awakened beings who produce aspirations that in turn give rise to mundane beings (in whom the transcendent sounds of Kalapingka are present in body, speech, and mind). By thus connecting Kalapingka's sound with resultant powers and the notions of awakened body and emanation body from descriptions of transcendent pantheon, the *Unimpeded Sound* is again able to imagine a transcendent cosmology using

³¹⁸ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 133.3-4.

³¹⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 133.4-5.

sound, and in turn, encoding those sounds with cosmological significance that will overflow during contemplative practices of sounding and listening.

Conclusion to Part Two

Sonic imaginations of transcendence are created via these three discourses of ontology, epistemology, and cosmology in the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. By imagining the transcendent ground of reality and the myriad ways that awakened beings are categorized, conceptualized, and narrativized onto soundscapes, these textual traditions have worked to encode sounds central to their individual projects with transcendent meanings and illustrate the ways sound can effect transcendent transformations. This is the second half of the sonic imaginations for these textual traditions, dovetailing with their imaginations around the mundane world. As existence and quiescence are often considered two sides of the same hand, so too to are the soundscapes of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* encoded with these dual imaginations, finding pathways that lead from sound, through the constrictions of our mundane world, finally unfolding into their ultimate manifestations of transcendence.

The transcendent imaginations that these texts map onto sound can be understood, like their mundane counterparts, as attempts to holistically account for the transcendent within their sonic imaginations. They again use traditional tantric Buddhist categories of transcendence, such as the ground, the three awakened bodies, the five awakened attributes, and maṇḍala or cosmological structures with known individual deities to establish their imaginations. The *Secret Matrix* tends to follow historically normative tantric ways of considering the role of sound in these categories of transcendence, marking a Mahāyoga orientation towards traditional paradigms. The *Unimpeded Sound*, though, continues to innovate. While thinking with many of the traditional categories used in tantric literature, it finds novel ways to conceive of a transcendent world and revelation of awakening through sound.

Sound is again an ontological touchstone for the imaginations of transcendence in both texts, which employ central points of sonic discourse within Indian and Tibetan linguistic and religious discourse to shape and orient their imaginations. Each deity of the *Secret Matrix* is correlated with a letter of the alphabet in ways that reinforce and synergize the structures of both the maṇḍala and the alphabet. Pairs are made according to both deity groupings and letter families in ways that address the concerns of the mundane imagination regarding the separation of external environments and living beings. And all of these deities are born from a foundational Buddha who is gendered female and connected to the letter *A*, using the embryological and linguistic models in combination to consider the ways that transcendent deities enter the world. The sonic imagination of transcendence in the *Unimpeded Sound* instead finds resonance with the Buddha's attribute of awakened speech. It draws upon traditional accounts of the Buddha's oratory abilities, including his capacity to verbally impact all beings and show them the truth, and the famed sixty qualities of his speech. These previous ideas of transcendent sound inform the ways that the transcendent pantheon is awakened, the verbal ways they act, and both the depth and breadth of the Buddha's incarnations, verbal intonations, and capacities to awaken beings.

Transcendent truths are said to be revealed to adepts via sound, establishing a counter epistemology to mundane concealment. Rubrics of the awakened being such as the awakened bodies showcase the kinds of awakened knowledge that is available via transcendent sound and correlate the revelatory power of sound with their diverse forms. They trace images of buddhas as multi-dimensional beings, simultaneously resting within this ground of reality itself, appearing from letters in luminous and bejeweled forms, and

emanating into our world for the benefit of beings – all of which interact with sound in distinct ways for both texts. Traditional theoretical knowledge of the three types of awakened bodies is combined with systems of sound to reimagine the ways that an empty reality can arise in resplendent forms. For the *Secret Matrix*, the letter *A* mirrors the reality body as they both come to manifest as the letters of the alphabet and the transcendent deities who correspond to them. For the *Unimpeded Sound*, the three awakened bodies map onto the four elemental sounds, who transmit their capacities from the natural sound of reality to beings whose own bodies align with those sounds.

Finally, transcendent sonic cosmologies feature a foundational reality which encapsulates ideas of the foundation or ground from which all phenomenal manifestations within both the mundane and transcendent worlds arise. It is transcendent not because it is a destination one arrives at by overcoming the mundane world, though it is held as the highest resultant state of contemplative practice within these traditions. Rather, it transcends the reckoning of ordinary minds, and thus called “inconceivable” and “inexpressible.” However, that does not mean it is ‘unimaginable’ for these texts, who imagine it across specific and foundational aspects of their soundscapes – the sound of *A* and the natural sound of reality – sounds that have their own capacity for awakening and which give rise to all the other transcendent sounds of these texts. And while transcendent reality (along with its sounds) does manifest into the phenomenal forms and soundscapes of the mundane world as well (which are often seen more as symptoms of straying and confused beings), the idea of reality as transcendent is deeply embedded within the systems that represent the awakened beings of the transcendent pantheon who manifest due to sound and act sonically.

These awakened beings are either individualized into paired and interreferential maṇḍala groupings along the continuum of the Wheel Garland of Letters or depicted as individually awakening through processes of spontaneous sonic conversion. As named deities of a transcendent pantheon, they serve as gravitational fields around which a host of ideas and imaginations constellate. These ideas may originate prior to these textual traditions, such as with the primary Buddhas of the five awakened families – Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi – all of whom have rich histories of literature and practice within tantric and Mahāyāna forms of Tibetan Buddhism and their Indian antecedents. Likewise, even the non-Buddhist deities come with prepackaged imaginations, such as Brahmā’s famed melodic voice, or the mythical beauty of the kalapinka bird’s song. Within these texts though, new imaginations and retellings of these named deities build upon these older ideas while mapping their identities onto the texts’ soundscapes. However, while the *Secret Matrix* values a unified structure of sound underlying its transcendent pantheon, the *Unimpeded Sound* presents individual sonic spheres of influence for each of its deities, who descend and act within a vertical cosmology of the central universal mountain, Meru.

The sonic imaginations of both the mundane and the transcendent are foundational to understanding the ways these traditions use sonic contemplative practice. In Part Three of this dissertation, we will turn to the contemplative trajectory of these texts as they mobilize these encoded soundscapes in sonic contemplations. The design of those spaces and their sensory contemplations takes up these sonic imaginations to foster atmospheres in which practitioners can become affected physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Part Three

Sonic Contemplation

This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path, namely... right speech... – The Buddha³²⁰

Imagine for a minute that this piece of paper... represents space-time, and you want to get from point A here [pierces paper with pencil] to point B there [pierces other end of paper with pencil]. Now what's the shortest distance between two points? "A straight line!" Wrong. The shortest distance between two points is zero. And that's what the gateway does. It folds space, so that point A and point B coexist in the same space and time [folds paper over and threads the pencil through the two holes simultaneously]. When the spacecraft passes through the gateway, space returns to normal. – Dr. William Weir, Event Horizon

I'm not planning on that. No, my plan is for my plan to work. But you know what they say about the best-laid plans, right? [realizing] Said "plan" too many times. Word's lost all its meaning now. Plan. Plan. Plan... – Ted Lasso

Introduction

How do we move beyond suffering? We may be aware of the causes and conditions of the sufferings state of our mundane world. And we may have even heard about the wonders of transcendence and the beings therein. However, what is the method to move between these two states of existence? In the last of the Buddha's four points detailing his understanding of the world, he offered a path that included, among seven other aspects, the progression of speech from mundane convention to transcendence revelation. Our question still remains though – how do the ways we communicate with the world, make declarations of our intents, weave melody into our voice, and listen to our environments allow us to move between this delusional state and transcendent reality? We will such

³²⁰ Rupert Gethin. *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

awakening in the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras realized in acoustic and affective atmospheres. In this final part, we will explore how atmospheres are produced in contemplative practices through the joining of subjective experience, informed by sonic imaginations, and the visualized and material environments, the soundscapes of which reflect qualities of those imaginations. The ways these texts mobilize their imaginations in contemplative practices, elevating them from mere theories to embodied experiences, will grant us insight into the practical ways Nyingma Tantra invokes acoustic awakening.

Sonic contemplation is a primary methodology that both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras use to bring their imaginations of mundane and transcendent sound to life. These contemplative practices experientially demonstrate the expressive capacity of sound and bridge together the environments and beings of both the mundane and transcendent worlds. To accomplish this, these texts explore sound through a diversity of mediums – acoustic, multi-sensory, physiological, and approaches that privilege either the interior spaces of ourselves or the exterior material world. Following these contours of the texts, we will investigate the many ways that the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* take up their imaginations in divergent contemplations.

Our exploration will begin by attuning to the ways these two texts present their contemplative programs. Traditionally, Mahāyoga and Great Perfection contemplations differ wildly in terms of effort and aesthetic. Mahāyoga tantric deity yoga practices revolve around linear progressions of ritual procedures that constantly reference each other and their broader tantric imaginations. They follow narrative forms leading mundane beings towards awakening in divine forms. These narrative progressions from

ignorance to wisdom are repeated over and over, modeling a sequence of activities that ultimately lead to awakening. These are presented through aesthetics of power and sexuality and offer freedom in blissful union or violent liberation. Their activities are effortful, purposefully controlling the body, the ways we speak, and our mental attentions and visualizations. It is through such active processes that they theorize one can be awakened quickly. Conversely, the Great Perfection relies on ease and effortlessness. In an aesthetics of nature and spontaneity, achieving a state of easefulness allows the transcendent aspects of ourselves, always present though hidden, to self-emerge into our experience. Their practices, while often hierarchical in nature, are often nebulous, material, and individualized. In our explorations of the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, foundational representations of both traditions in Nyingma Tantric literature, we will consider their traditional divergences in contemplation, and how these particular texts orient their contemplative practices of sound around and against such traditional approaches.

After investigating the contemplative programs of both texts, we will revisit the three framing issues to which we have attended throughout this dissertation – the expressivity of sound, sonic constructions of reality, and sound as a medium of inquiry. The contemplative practices of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* are mobilizing the mundane and transcendent imaginations which themselves took on these concerns. We will thus explore in this chapter the ways that their contemplations reflect the central issues explored in the imaginations and activate them through contemplative practices including recitation, auralization, and listening.

We have previously heard the ways that sound can occlude reality from us through

linguistic, numerical, and material reification of our world and ourselves. However, sound has also been shown to dissipate these clouds of ignorance and reveal transcendent reality. How will this theoretical understanding of sound's expressive capacity to both conceal and reveal be brought into the contemplative experiences of practitioners? What kind of expressive capacities will we witness through attention to these sonic contemplations? What is the role of referential meaning across these capacities of sound? And how will sound move practitioners from states of confused concealment towards transcendent revelation?

Thinking with sound's capacities to both delude beings into experiencing the mundane world and usher in realizations of transcendent realities, these two texts constructed broader sonic worlds across their mundane and transcendent imaginations. Above a foundation of reality from which these worlds manifest, we have mapped out four quadrants in these imaginations. These chart the axis between exterior environments and living beings interior to them, and likewise the axis leading from the mundane world to the transcendent. While these quadrants seem separated, the imaginations have creatively found ways to connect them. Paired letter families in the *Secret Matrix's* letter index join together aspects of our individual selves and our elemental and sensory environments. Likewise, our bodies become encoded with elemental data that reflect the broader material world. How will the contemplations of both texts move through these maps of sonic imagination? How will they bring such carefully constructed worlds into contemplative modes of inquiry? How will they activate these bridges between interior and exterior, mundane and transcendent? And what effect will such movements and collapses of the sonic constructions of the world have on practitioners?

Finally, we will analyze the mediums of these sonic contemplative inquiries. How do the modes through which these texts approach sound affect the ways that sound is understood by practitioners and the ways it impacts them? Here, we will examine differences between the production or reception of audible sounds, the kinds of multi-sensorial avenues are traversed when dealing with sound, the ways that sound suffuses the body for contemplative ends, and the ways that these texts privilege interiority or exteriority. How do such mediums of inquiry alter the contemplative programs of both texts? How do these mediums reflect a broader traditional concern between Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection? How do they frame these contemplations with their limits or provide new opportunities for exploration? And how do these divergent paths lead to unique experiences?

Chapter 5: Sonic Contemplations in the Tantras

The *Secret Matrix* embeds the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet within a visualized transcendent maṇḍala palace. These arise in the form of the forty-two transcendent deities who purify the forty-two concepts of the mundane world, with the practitioner presiding over this process as the central deity. Through complex processes of auralization, recitation, and transformation, practitioners construct and transform this contemplative atmosphere, and in turn are transformed by it.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead offers a host of sonic and materially driven contemplations that address the many ways sound influences our world and ourselves. Its primary focus, though, is on the sounds of our environment. It thus prescribes contemplations in natural spaces where the elements intensely resound. Mountains, rivers, forests, and stones become the sites for deep practices of listening, allowing the sounds of the elements to unfold into transcendent experiences of howling beings and melodious goddesses.

5.1 *Secret Matrix* Contemplative Acoustic Design

The contemplative practice for the *Secret Matrix* tantra is deity yoga, a practice in which a practitioner arises in the awakened form of a transcendent deity, generates a transcendent maṇḍala world filled with other deities, and acts for the benefit of beings. This is both a visual and aural process, and thus the *Secret Matrix*'s deity yoga practice on the peaceful maṇḍala of forty-two deities involves visualizations, auralizations, and recitations. Descriptions for the visualization of the maṇḍala dominate the sixth chapter of the root verses and commentary. If chapter six is the landscape of contemplation, chapter seven follows with the soundscape. The seventh chapter details mantra recitation

and auralization. They offer a dynamic narrative practice in which deities of the transcendent pantheon arise from letters arrayed in the maṇḍala. These deities are further correlated with seed syllables and mantras that carry the with of both the mundane and transcendent sonic imaginations of the *Secret Matrix*. Mantra recitation and resonance are combined with sexual yoga practices to generate visualized forms of these deities and incite activities that purify the delusions identified in the mundane imagination. Mantras further invoke the forty-two awakened beings themselves to descend into the visualizations. Finally, the sounds of mantra initiate empowerment, whereby practitioners are blessed with awakened attributes and all phenomena dissolve into the primordial knowing of foundational reality.

There are six component parts to the sonic practice of deity yoga for the *Secret Matrix* that will be detailed below. They include arranging the alphabet into the maṇḍala, correlating the mantras of the practice with the sonic imaginations, generating the deities via mantra and sexual yoga, inviting the wisdom beings of the maṇḍala, identification with transcendence through mantra recitation, and the dissolution into reality.

5.1.1 Arranging the Alphabet in the Maṇḍala

The generation of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala and its resident deities of the transcendent pantheon begins with sound. The letters of the alphabet, imbued with imaginations of the mundane world and transcendence, are arrayed across a map in the shape of a maṇḍala palace. These initial placements chart the arrangement of the maṇḍala, with its directional and radial hierarchies. It is from these letters that the deities will emerge, filling this visualized transcendent space with the *Secret Matrix*'s pantheon.

*The causal white letter **A** resides in the space of the interior of the immeasurable palace. The blue letters **A** and **Kṣa** emanate together in accordance with the ways they were studied previously. ... The letters [of the alphabet] emerge from that supporting combination of method and wisdom residing in space, like fire emerging from the material supports of flint and steel.*

*The pair of standard and reverse **Tha** [and **Ṭha**] emerge and reside on the seat in the center of the maṇḍala. Standard and reverse **Ta** [and **Ṭa** emerge and reside] in the east. Standard and reverse **Da** [and **Ḍa** reside] in the south, standard and reverse **Dha** [and **Ḍha**] in the west, and standard and reverse **Na** [and **Ṇa**] in the north. The reversed letters are the male consorts [of the consort pairs] and are thus placed on the right.*

The Sun's Quintessence, 458.5-459.3

The maṇḍala emerges from the letter *A*. This takes up previous descriptions of *A* as the source of all the deities in the transcendent sonic imagination. In this passage though, there is an intermediary stage in generation that includes the letter *Kṣa* and a second letter *A*, imagined as the primordial deities Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī. These letters are described as the cause and condition for the emergence of the rest of the alphabet, evoked through the simile of flint and steel. The rest of the letters emerge like fire from them and take up their proper places in the maṇḍala. These are described according to pairs of letters, which corresponded to consort pairs of pantheon deities in the transcendent imagination.

The descriptions follow the ordering set out in the transcendent letter-index, beginning with the letter families for *Ṭha* and *Tha*, correlated with the five primary Buddha consort pairs of the maṇḍala. The connection between their visual forms is accentuated here, described as “standard and reverse,” indicating the Tibetan standard orthograph of the *Ta* family, and the way its letterform is horizontally reversed in the retroflex *Ṭa* family. In this way, the pair of *Ṭha* and *Tha*, the main letters of the maṇḍala, emerge and are visualized in the center of the maṇḍala. *Ṭha* is to the right since it

represents the male half of the consort pair. The rest of the letters from these families follow suit, taking up positions in the four cardinal directions of the maṇḍala corresponding to the normative tantric directions for their respective deities. **Ta** and **Ṭa** go to the East as Vairocana and consort, **Da** and **Ḍa** go to the south as Ratnasambhava and consort, **Dha** and **Ḍha** emerge in the West as Amitabha and consort, and **Na** and **Ṇa** head to the north as Amogasiddhi and consort.

The remaining letter families and groups follow suit, taking up their individual positions in the maṇḍala as consort pairs. The **Ka** and **Ca** families corresponding to the four pairs of Inner Bodhisattvas reside on the four walls of the maṇḍala, starting with **Ka** and **Ca** in the east and proceeding clockwise – **Kha** and **Cha** on the southern wall and so forth. Their nasal letters, **Nga** and **Nya**, reside as the wrathful gatekeepers of the Eastern and Southern gates. The **Pa** family and the semivowels take up residence on the four corners of the maṇḍala wall in the ordinal directions beginning with **Pa** and **Ya** on the south-eastern corner and likewise proceeding clockwise. The nasal letter **Ma** is positioned at the gate to the West.

The six vowels that correspond to the six sages emanating in the mundane six realms are not in consort pairs. Instead, these letters are individually arrayed clockwise, starting with **I** and **Ī**, on lotus seats in the three southern (south-east, south, and south-west) and three northern directions (north-west, north, and north-east). The two remaining vowels, **O** and **Au**, are placed at the final gate to the North.

The four letters acting as gatekeepers are joined by the three sibilants and aspirate **Ha**, as their four consorts. These are placed underneath the letters assigned as male gatekeepers as subscripts. Thus, **Śa** is at the eastern gate as a subscript of **Nga**, **Ṣa** is at

the Southern gate, *Sa* is in the West, and *Ha* is in the North below *Au*. Finally, *Kṣa* and *A* take their final positions in the maṇḍala on the third floor of the East and West respectively, staked above the gatekeepers and the inner bodhisattvas.

Having been arrayed thus, the syllables emit light rays to the ten directions, purifying the obscurations of speech of sentient beings, invoking the spoken tantras of Buddhas, and returning again, dissolving into the forty-two letters. The letters then turn into seals, which then become the forms of the forty-two deities. ... By reciting their [letter] essences, each deity's form is made manifest."

The Sun's Quintessence, 460.2-6

The letters are recited and visualized as emitting light rays, combining mediums of visual and aural contemplation. This ignites a process whereby the light and sound of the letters purifies the speech of living beings, their photic-phonic combinations are blessed by the awakened beings, and they return to their letter forms, which are imbued with those blessings. Thus begins the process of generation for the deities themselves. The letters then turn into seals or *mudrās* (*phyag rgya* or *phyag mtshan*), which are described elsewhere in the chapter as the primary implements each deity holds, such as vajras, jewels, and lotuses. These seals then transform into the visualized forms of the forty-two deities of the *Secret Matrix's* transcendent pantheon.

5.1.2 Correlating Mantra and Imagination

With these letters placed in the maṇḍala, the seventh chapter of the *Secret Matrix* turns to the recitation of mantras that will enact the transformations described above. The root verses merely give a string of mantras – it is up to the commentarial tradition to explain their meaning, correlations, and use. Thus, an initial section of the seventh chapter in the commentary details each mantra according to its individual syllables. The first mantra

described, “**Bhrum** bishva bishuddhe”³²¹ correlates with the generation of the maṇḍala palace itself. The root-letter “**Bhrum**” initiates the creation of this transcendent space that is both varied, “*viśva*” and pure “*viśuddhe*.” The remaining forty-two mantras are thus described in such a space.

“Hung Vajra Dhrik” and so forth. In this context, the seed syllables that generate the deities are [either the forty-two] individual letters in the Wheel-[Garland] of letters or are the [root-]letters explained here, such as Om, Hung, and so forth. One may apprehend the arrangement of letters on [maṇḍala] seats and recite [their] mantras either all at once, or [sequentially, via] letters [becoming] seals, which [in turn] generate the forms of the deities, and at which time the mantras are recited.

[For this mantra] Hung is the root letter. Vajra means adamantine. Dhrik means holder. [Thus, this mantra correlates to] the generation of Vajra Holder, who is the awakened mind [of the Adamantine] family, Akṣobhya Buddha.

Om Jina Jik. **Om** is the root letter, as are all the first letters explained here. Jina means victor. “Jik” means holder. Holder of Victors is Vairocana of the Buddha Family.

“**Svā** Ratna Dhrik.” Ratna means precious jewel. Dhrik means holder. This is Ratnasambhava of the Jewel Family.

“**Ām** Aro Lik.” Aro refers to the speech family. Lik means holder. Lotus Holder is Amitābha.

“**Dā** Prajñā Dhrik.” Prajñā refers to the sword marked by wisdom. Dhrik means holder. This is Amoghasiddhi of the Action Family.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 522.3-523.3

There are typically three components to each mantra in this section which include the root-letter, the primary seal (or point of imagination for the deity), and an epithet, such as “holder” or “lord.” Thus, for the description on the first mantra, associated with Akṣobhya, the central deity of the maṇḍala, **Hung** is described as the root-letter. *Vajra* is

³²¹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 521.5.

the symbol of his awakened family, the Adamantine³²² Family, and the implement he holds. He is thus given the epithet “holder.”

The root-letter is a sound that is simultaneously distinct from the letters of the alphabet, but which serves the same function. In the above example, *Hung* is the root-letter, but *Tha* is the alphabetical letter. The commentary equates the mantras’ root-letters and the alphabetical letters, which have already been described within the maṇḍala as the generative source of the deities. Thus, both can be used to generate the deities of the maṇḍala. After establishing this direct correlation between alphabet letters and root-letters, the text will almost entirely stop using the alphabetical letters, favoring their correlate root-letters as they are indicated in the mantras. This passage thus attempts to resolve a tension in the tantra, between the constructions of mundane and transcendent imaginations around the alphabet and the recitation of mantras with divergent root-letters, by equating them.

It is interesting to note that while these are Sanskrit mantras, the Sanskrit meanings of the words are not always privileged. *Vajra*, *jina*, and *ratna* all directly refer to the items these deities are holding. *Prajña* simply means wisdom, though is evocative in Buddhist literature of the sword marked by wisdom, as is commonly held by Mañjuśrī. However, *aro* does not refer to speech, nor does *dhrik*, or *lik*, mean “holder.” *Drik* is Sanskrit for seeing (from *dr̥ṣ*), and these may better be translated as the deities seen with their implements, rather than holding them. This pattern continues throughout these descriptions, with some words matching their definitions, and some not. This seems to

³²² “Vajra” has multiple meanings, demonstrated by this passage. It is a descriptor, meaning unbreakable or adamantine, as in the name of this family. However, it is also a central tantric ritual implement. Thus, this deity can also hold a vajra while being part of the Adamantine Family.

indicate that the commentary is not terribly concerned with correct translation. However, it is deeply concerned with correlating these mantras to distinct sets of meaning, often that tie in with its sonic imaginations.

The rest of the mantras are described in the same way. For example, *Svā* is the root letter for Ratnasambhava's mantra in place of *Da*, and he is described as holding a jewel, *ratna*, according to this mantra. This pattern continues with the rest of the deities of the maṇḍala, though in a slightly new order that privileges consort pairs. These five primary male consorts are followed by the five primary female consorts. However, where before the bodhisattvas adhered to the structure of the letter family, here the final member of each family is removed since these transcendent deities correspond to the four gatekeepers and are grouped separately. Thus, after the primary consort pairs, there are the four consort pairs of inner bodhisattvas, the four consort pairs of outer bodhisattvas, and the four consort pairs of gatekeepers. These are divided into their male and female constituent parts, whereby the males are described first, and the females second for each pair.

Finally, the mantras for Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī are described in this way, as the trio of awakened body, speech, and mind and the adamantine expanse of reality, respectively. The six sages in the six realms of living beings share the same mantra format, “*Om muni krem svaha*,” where the syllable *Krem* is replaced by an individual syllable for each sage.

For a full layout of the corresponding mantras, root-letters, and implements of each of the forty-two deities, refer to *Appendix: The Mantra Index*.

5.1.3 Generating the Deities: Mantra and Sexual Yoga

The commentary turns to the actual generation of the deities with these correspondent meanings in mind. This contemplative practice involves mantra recitation and sexual yoga.

Bhrum emits from your own heart, and dissolves into light in the space in front of you. There, meditate on the expansion of the immeasurable palace, complete with its throne. [Visualize] yourself as Vajrasattva with consort.... Exhort [each other] with the symbolic [verbal calls and responses] for male and female consort pairs, such as “samaya ho!” The special bodhicitta [semen produced from] inseparable [sexual] play of the male and female consort, then emits into the [vaginal] space of the female consort, which is thus consecrated as the essence of the immeasurable palace.

One part of [that] bodhicitta [semen] that emits into the [vaginal] space of the female consort becomes a red **Bhrum**. Saying **Ja**, meditate on the **Bhrum** residing in that space in front [of you]. Recite “**Bhrum** viśva viśuddhe.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 527.6-528.4

The root-letter **Bhrum**, previously correlated with the immeasurable palace of the maṇḍala, emanates from one’s heart and creates that palace in front of one’s eyes. In that transcendent environment, a practitioner with either a physical or visualized consort partner will visualize themselves as Vajrasattva, the Buddha of purity, along with his female consort. In that purified state, the consorts engage in (physical or visualized) sexual intercourse. This process begins with a set of verbalized calls and responses between the consorts, outlined later in the chapter. There it details the following verbal exchange where the female consort speaks first followed by the male response: “‘*Samaya stvam*, I am your commitment consort.’ ‘*Samaya ho*, you are the object of my commitment.’ ‘*Rago ho*, I am the object of desire,’ ‘*Om nirti ragayami*, you are the site

of my desire.’”³²³

With these mantras and verbal expressions of sexual passion, the sexual union climaxes with the semen, traditionally euphemized as “bodhicitta” or “the mind of awakening,” ejaculating into the vaginal “space” of the female sexual partner. This bodhicitta semen becomes the material support for the root-letters discussed previously to emerge into this space. This begins with the letter **Bhrum**, which gives rise to the immeasurable palace environment of the maṇḍala within the vaginal space of the female consort. This will be the location in which all the other root-letters will emerge and transform via mantra into their respective transcendent deities.

*Further, from [another] part of the bodhicitta [semen that comes] from the secret [sexual] place, the duo of **Hung** and **Mūm** emerge. They reside on top of the seat in the center of the immeasurable palace in the space in front of you. By expressing “**Hung** vajra dhrik, **Mūm** dhātṽ śvarī,” the syllables suddenly become the forms of Akṣobhya and consort, complete with ornaments. [Saying] **Ja**, they emerge in the space in front of you.*

Om dissolves into the crown [of their heads]. **A** dissolves into [their] throats. **Hung** dissolves into their hearts. Thereby, their [visualized] awakened forms are enriched. Emanations [of them] are sent out to the ten directions, via which one offers the noble ones. With their twelve awakened activities, they act for the welfare of living beings. Their particular awakened activities purify grasping onto the aggregate of consciousness and [the element of] space as real. [These emanations] then gather into the root form of Akshobhya with consort. Clearly visualize those awakened forms. [Request for them to stay with the phrase,] “Please reside on the expansive central seat of the immeasurable palace in the [vaginal] space [of the female consort!]”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 528.4-529.3

A part of the bodhicitta sperm breaks off to become the root-letters **Hung** and **Mūm**, correlated via mantra with Akṣobhya and his consort, Samantabhadrī.³²⁴ They travel to

³²³ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 547.1-2.

³²⁴ Samantabhadrī plays two roles in this maṇḍala, first as the consort of Akṣobhya, and second as the

the central throne of the maṇḍala palace, their designated locations. One then recites their mantras together “*Hung vajra dhrik, Mūm dhātvī śvarī*,” thus transforming those root-letters into the visual forms of Akṣobhya and Samantabhadrī in sexual union. Expressing the syllable *Ja* finalizes this transformation, bringing their visualized forms into the maṇḍala. The three syllables *Om*, *Ā*, and *Hung* dissolve into their heads, throats, and hearts, respectively. These three syllables are correlated to the awakened body, speech, and mind in normative tantric understanding and in the *Secret Matrix*’s transcendent imagination. Thus, these visualized forms are granted the capacities of these three awakened attributes via the three syllables.

Emanations are dispatched from these deities.³²⁵ They perform standard tantric activities – offering to the Buddhas and benefiting beings with the twelve enlightened activities. In addition though, they each have specific activities intricately tied to the mundane sonic imagination that surrounds them. For example, the emanations of Akṣobhya and his consort Samantabhadrī target the psycho-physical aggregate of consciousness and the element of space, the concepts correlated with these two deities in the letter-index of the mundane and transcendent sonic imaginations. Both are viewed, from a mundane conceptual perceptive, as substantially real (*dnegos*) – a delusion that these emanations dismantle before returning to the central deities. The practice concludes with a verbal exhortation, urging these deities to stay in the maṇḍala palace thus visualized.

This process iterates throughout the remainder of the forty-two deities of the *Secret*

consort of Samantabhadra that ignite and oversee the entire maṇḍala.

³²⁵ The commentary does not specify what these emanations look or sound like, though these are often smaller versions of the deity, sometimes exuding from their pores, or simply as light.

Matrix maṇḍala. Each deity consort pair³²⁶ arises from the root-letters correlated with them in the previous section and via the recitation of their mantras. They are placed in the maṇḍala according to the locations set out by their alphabetical letters above. Their emergence is enacted by reciting **Ja**, and their bodies filled with awakened qualities from **Om**, **Ā**, and **Hung**. Each pair addresses the delusional concepts of the mundane world attributed to them in the letter-index. And finally, the practitioner verbally requests them to remain.

5.1.4 Inviting the Deities

Everything up to this point has been merely the appearance of transcendence. These are known as commitment beings (*samayasattva*). They set the transcendent maṇḍala stage onto which the true transcendent wisdom beings (*jñanasattva*) may descend. The process of inviting these transcendent deities into such a visualized and auralized space is also performed via sounds. In particular, there are four special syllables that invite these beings and cause them to become coterminous with oneself as the deity, and with all the transcendent deities of the maṇḍala pantheon.

“Ja Hung Bam Ho!” *[Reciting] Ja invites the wisdom beings towards you. [Reciting] Hung dissolves [the wisdom palace and beings] into the immeasurable palace and all the deities of the maṇḍala one by one. [Reciting] Bam makes the wisdom being commitment being inseparable, like water dissolving into water or butter into butter. [Reciting] Ho brings essential joy to this inseparable connection.*

The Sun’s Quintessence, 554.3-5

This is the marker of the transformation between mundane and transcendent for the *Secret Matrix*. Each sound is recited to invoke a different stage of transformation. **Ja** calls

³²⁶ In some cases, these are individual deities, such as with the six sages.

the wisdom beings to come forth and **Hung** dissolves them into the commitment beings of the maṇḍala. It is interesting to note here, that even the external environment of the palace is consecrated with its own transcendent version. **Bam** truly mixes these two types of beings together, making them as inseparable as a drop of water entering a pool – they are now one entity. Finally, **Ho** makes this connection of transcendent deity and mundane being joyful, completing the process of transformation and empowering³²⁷ beings to engage the world as transcendent deities.

5.1.5 Identifying with the Deities: Pride and Blessings

Now that the practitioner is irrevocably united with the transcendent beings of the maṇḍala, they are ready to identify with this embodiment of the five forms of primordial knowing and the five awakened attributes. These are categorized under two rubrics: the generation of divine pride and receive blessings.

Divine pride is often a featured aspect of deity-yoga, in which one experientially recognizes themselves as the transcendent deity they have visualized. This is more than just a statement; it is meant to invoke and reflect an embodied experience. The five modes of divine pride correspond to the five central deities of the maṇḍala, purveyors of the five types of primordial knowing – experiential realizations of foundational reality according to five manifest aspects of it – knowing great emptiness, mirror-like knowing,

³²⁷ Empowerment is typically a stage of tantric practice. In this chapter, the empowerment section is relatively brief, and focuses on visual models of light emitting from one's heart to the Buddhas of the ten directions within the maṇḍala. The light returns to oneself, whereby they are empowered. This is explained to take place through the previous mantras above, which we have witnessed include such emanations going out to the Buddhas of the ten direction and returning with their blessings, indicating that this process has been occurring throughout the mantra recitation section. In addition, the four syllables **Ja**, **Hung**, **Bam**, and **Ho** are also correlated to empowerment, as they collapse the transcendent being with the mundane being.

knowing with discernment, knowing equality, and knowing that accomplishes activities.

The Recitation of Mantras. recite “Om mahā śūñatā jñāna vajra svabhāva ātmako haṃ”. Further, as for this mantra, Om [refers to] the five primordial knowing. Mahā means great. Śūñatā is emptiness. Jñāna is primordial wisdom. Vajra is adamantine. Svabhāva is total purity. Ātmako haṃ means “I am that.” Thus, you are reciting “I am the totally pure adamantine being, the primordial knowing of great emptiness.” The Lord Akṣobhya [appears via reciting this mantra.] He is blue in color, holding a vajra and bell, and sitting on a lotus seat at the crown of your head as Akshobya.³²⁸ Meditate on this all at once. When you realize accomplishment unmistakably, [you will have realized] “knowing great emptiness.”

The Sun’s Quintessence, 535.3-536.1

These mantras are spoken statements of identification with the deities. When the Sanskrit is translated into Tibetan, the practitioner understands that the mantras announce such identification. Recitation of these mantras causes the respective deity to appear on a practitioner’s head in five different locations: Akṣobhya at the crown, Vairocana on the forehead, Amitabhā in the nape of the neck, Ratnasambhava behind the right ear, and Amoghasiddhi behind the left. These arrays of deities appear on each of the five central Buddhas of the maṇḍala and even on the less central figures, though their arrays only contain the Buddha closest to them. This process of verbal identification and physical array finally leads to the realization of the five primordial knowings – the ways the Buddhas interact with the world.

A similar process unfolds for receiving the blessings of the five awakened attributes: awakened body, speech, mind, qualities and activities. Five mantras are given, that are translated as statements of identification with one of the attributes. Thus, one announces

³²⁸ The visualization has shifted the subjective experience into this central deity.

that “I am the total purity of the great adamantine awakened body of all the Buddhas!”³²⁹ and so forth for each of the five. These recitations trigger the five attributes to appear, personified and visualized as transcendent beings. They each appear in a different part of the practitioner’s body, as well as in all the deities of the maṇḍala.

These five locations reflect standard tantric correlations of the five attributes with five energy hubs in the tantric body. In this way, awakened body appears in the crown, awakened speech in the throat, mind in the heart, qualities (here, termed awakened desire) in the navel, and activities (here, viewed as awakened offering) in the ‘secret place’ correlated with the sexual organs. Finally, these blessings coalesce into matrix syllables at the heart of each of these five deities: **Om** in the heart of Awakened Body in one’s head, **Ā** in the heart of Awakened Speech in one’s throat, **Hung** for Mind in the heart, **Sra** for Qualities in the navel, and **Ha** for Activities in the ‘secret place’ of the sexual organs.

Thus, verbally announcing transcendent identification with mantra enacts a process whereby one’s body is suffused with the transcendent deities of primordial knowing and awakened attributes. These lead to the realization of such awakened knowledge and the attainment of awakened body, speech, mind and so forth. These are the ways a Buddha exists in, and engages with, the world. By identifying as these deities and embodying their qualities, one transforms from their existence as mundane beings to the experience of being transcendent.

³²⁹ *The Sun’s Quintessence*, 538.3.

5.1.6 Dissolving through Expression

Finally, oneself as an empowered transcendent being dissolves into reality via the recitation of these mantras. Thus, the commentary informs us that

expressing the previous mantras of awakened speech [triggers] “dissolution.” All phenomena dissolve into the state of the five [deities of] primordial wisdom and the five [deities of] awakened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities. [They produce] “clarity” as the awakened mind is luminous with the realization of wisdom. [And they ignite] “blazing” [via] the realization of the awakened mind’s wisdom blazing higher and higher.

The Sun’s Quintessence, 540.1-2

Dissolution is typically the final stage of deity yoga practice, where the visualization dissolves into emptiness and one is meant to rest in the experience of foundational reality. This process is triggered by the expression (*brjod pas*) of the mantras used above, imagined in terms of awakened speech. All the phenomena of the mundane world dissolve into the five central deities on the maṇḍala described in the empowerment, as well as the five deities who represent the five awakened attributes from the transcendent imagination. The rest of the deities of the maṇḍala also dissolve into these central figures, as does oneself. One’s mind attains the clarity of the awakened mind, and the realization of this wisdom increases and expands like a blazing fire, and the intense lights and colors of the maṇḍala are recognized as wisdom.

It is somewhat uncharacteristic here that the imagination of emptiness is not engaged, as it typically is a featured state of the dissolution practice. What we find instead is a positive conclusion in which all that remains of ourselves, and both the mundane and transcendent worlds are the five primordial wisdoms and the five awakened attributes. Thus, via expressing the mantras of generation, invitation, and identification, the world and its beings transcend into bright and colorful awakening.

5.2 The *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra

In contrast to the unilateral and procedural script we find in the *Secret Matrix*'s sonic contemplations, the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra features a rich array of contemplative practices to address the issues presented in their mundane sonic imaginations and allow the realities of their transcendent imaginations unfold. If the *Secret Matrix* can be seen as a mostly linear progression,³³⁰ the sonic practices of the *Unimpeded Sound* extend out horizontally and intertwine. Any of the five types of sound – linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, elemental, or instructive – can be addressed at any point. Further, within each contemplation, the commentary provides a series of options for individualization. Depending on one's elemental constitution, the time of year, their age, and their capacities, these practices will look strikingly different, or will be performed in different orders. We thus find a broad and dynamic nexus of sonic contemplative practice within the *Unimpeded Sound* that mobilizes sonic imaginations and allows practitioners to choose their own path.

The text does privilege listening to the sounds of the elements as its main practice though. This is seen through constant references to elemental sound, experiences, and bodies throughout all five contemplative orientations to sound. In addition, while the rest of the contemplations remain in the *Five Descents of Sound* section, *Listening to the Elements* has its own sustained presentation later in the text. Retrospectively, we know that from among the contemplations of the *Unimpeded Sound*, *Listening to the Elements*

³³⁰ This itself is somewhat complicated, as the procedural practices within deity yoga are cross-referential within their system and are meant to be repeated frequently, such that the understandings gained from the end of the practice inform the contemplations at the beginning. However, as a procedure, it is narrative and linear in nature.

was the practice most adopted in the broader imagination of Tibetan Buddhism. However, it did not survive into the premodern era and was largely ignored by Longchenpa, the 14th century systemetizer of this larger tradition. The 18th century, Jigme Lingpa states that no one does this practice, though even such a reference that late is credit to this listening practice's longevity in the cultural imagination of Tibet. For this reason, I will linger on that sonic contemplation longer than the other four, whose explanations of practices and experiences are more limited in the text.

The second sharp distinction between the sonic contemplations of the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* revolves around environments, materials, and aesthetics. The *Secret Matrix* prescribed intricately detailed and organized visualized spaces. The sounds of the practice were almost entirely either auralized or recited.³³¹ The only material component described was from the sexual body. And while the sexual act included in the text was a material engagement with the world (if it itself wasn't visualized), the material supports of semen and vaginal space themselves, could only be experienced in a tactile way. The embodied experience of sexuality invited further auralization and visualization, though was not itself the focus of contemplation.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead features the aural experience of the material world in its contemplations. While it does use recitation practices in three of the other five descents, they are merely one part of a wider sonic approach. Within these practices, we will discover a commitment to materiality in its detailed instructions for constructing musical instruments, recipes for concocting intensely aromatic and flavored substances,

³³¹ The only exception to this is if one is practices with a physical partner, who would verbally communicate with them in prescribed ways.

guidance for moving and musically playing the body, and above all, its fascination with the sounds that come from the natural world. Listening to the Elements places practitioners in remote natural environments such as a river valley, a forest, or the top of a mountain. In these places, they interact with the material world in more ways than just by listening. Stones and logs are physically handled to produce sounds. The river's water splashes practitioners as they sit on its bank to listen. The smell of a sandalwood fire fills their nostrils. These practices thus offer deeply material and multi-sensorial contemplations centered on an aesthetics of the natural world.

As we explore these practices, we will also pay attention to the connection between sound and meaning. The *Secret Matrix* not only took care to correlate its contemplations to its imaginations, but methodically encoded meaning into the mantras it prescribed. The *Unimpeded Sound* will prove to have a different relationship to meaning. The term “sound and meaning” (*sgra don*) is often used to describe the sounds of these aural contemplations. But what meaning do they intend with this phrase? In certain ways, we will find that the *Unimpeded Sound* strips sounds of their mundane meanings, through processes akin to semantic satiation – a word spoken too many times loses all referential value. Through extended periods of recitation and listening, one may thus move past mundane understandings of language, numbers, melodies, and the sounds of the natural world. We will witness this loss of mundane meaning unfold into new understandings of a larger, transcendent world – perhaps the true meaning of these sounds.

Finally, throughout the contemplations of the *Unimpeded Sound*, we will encounter two distinct yet overlapping sets of explanations: designs for contemplative spaces, practices, and sounds; and the experiences that arise from those contemplations. The

border between these are fuzzy. As the sounds of the natural world give way to the cries of living beings and the melodies of goddesses, where do the instructions for contemplative listening end and the details of contemplative aural experience begin? Like the nebulous atmospheres these systems are creating, the audible sounds and the experience of them are interweaving and mutually informing processes, constantly transforming through the coming together of subjective humans and objective environments and dissolving their distinctions. In the following descriptions, each set of practices will be presented alongside its experiential results, though for the ease of our understanding, I will sometimes present the set of practices as a whole followed by their itinerant experiences.

5.2.1 Contemplating the Five Descents of Sound

The contemplative practices within the *Five Descents of Sound* are tightly interwoven with the sonic imaginations they produce, and with each other. While each has its own logic and concerns, such as the contemplations on Viṣṇu's numerical sounds targeting systems of enumeration, the methodologies and experiences of the practices are constantly referencing the other practices in the contemplative suite. But again, attention to the sounds and experiences of the elements persist throughout. In a formative introduction to the five descents, the commentary details the elemental results that arise from all sonic practices:

Via these five descents of sound... one can fly in the sky and travel unimpededly through stone. They are free from fear of the elements [since they cannot be] drowned in water, burned by fire, or scattered by the wind. They experience [this] through whichever of [these] great varieties of [contemplative] play they prefer.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 110.5-111.1

This passage reinforces two main premises of the *Unimpeded Sound*'s contemplative approach to sound. First, it points all five contemplations back to the elements. Ultimately, the results for any sonic practice engaged will be mastery over the elements, such that the material limits and dangers posed by our environments are overcome. These results are also included in the *Listening to the Elements* practice itself, each corresponding to its respective elemental practice. These kinds of references will be heard throughout the four other descent contemplations, such as when the commentary reflects in the discussion on the teacher's voice that all Buddhas "are awakened through training on the sounds and meanings of the four elements... [and] through thus training [their] speech on the extrinsic locations of sound, their conceptual grasping at the autonomy of the elements is destroyed."³³² In this way, acoustic awakening for the *Unimpeded Sound* happens in reference to elemental sound, even when it is not the central focus of contemplation.

Second, it underlines the diversity and individualization in one's choice of sonic path. Whichever of these diverse sonic contemplations one chooses to practice, or 'play' (*ci dga' rol ba sna 'tshogs pa*), will lead to such transcendent experiences. It is all dependent on one's preference, constitution, and capacity. With this in mind, let us turn to the sonic contemplations of the other four descents – Brahmā's letters, Viṣṇu's numbers, kalapingka's melodies, and the teacher's voice.

5.2.1.1 Brahmā's Letters

The contemplations on Brahmā's sounds are organized according to their location within

³³² *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 149.1-5.

the five psycho-physical aggregates of living beings. The stated goal for each is to dissolve grasping onto the five aggregates and the five emotional afflictions as autonomous and substantial. Each aggregate location is corresponded to a different elemental constitution, such that those with a water constitution should practice on Brahmā's sound in the location of the aggregate of physical form to exhaust the affliction of ignorance, those with an earth constitution should practice on the aggregate of sensation to exhaust pride, fire corresponds to discrimination and desire, wind to propensity for action and jealousy, and space to consciousness and anger.³³³ Within each element-aggregate-affliction combination, practices are further subdivided according to the three modalities of the elements in which one's constitution can be organized: centralized (*zur*), diffused (*byer*), and balanced (*snyoms*). In this way, the text breaks down the contemplation on Brahmā's sound into fourteen distinct practices.³³⁴

The general methodology involves the recitation of a syllable. With the exception of the syllable "atom" (*brdul*) for the physical form aggregate, the syllables are nonsense sounds such as "da" "nya" and "re," sounds that carry no semantic weight or that are even typically associated with mantra.³³⁵ These are continually recited for several months, during which time, experiences begin to emerge. These include a range of sensory experiences, such as visionary experiences of wheels, lotuses, and vajra

³³³ Though because space does not correlate to an elemental constitution, the practice concerns all four elemental body types.

³³⁴ Each set of practices does not adhere strictly to this layout. While there is only one practice for one with a water constitution, the section of space details four practices.

³³⁵ They are not standard mantric particles, nor do they carry any specific meaning, though they are spelled as if they were Tibetan words, including superscripts and prefixes that do not affect the sound of the syllable, only their meaning. This remains puzzling. It is possible that they are intended to look like words to confuse the semantic connection between words and meanings, as I will argue that this is largely a practice of semantic satiation.

evocative of experiences found in the pivotal *Direct Crossing* (*thod rgal*) practices of the Great Perfection. Other experiences include those of physical bliss, pain, and trembling; spontaneous verbal expressions of different sounds and languages; and experiences of mental clarity and radiance.

The primary experience, though, for each practice is hearing the sound of the element to which their constitution is attuned. Sometimes, this is merely a line at the end of the section, indicating that one “closely enjoys the sound” (*sgra la nye bar spyod pa*) of the element. They come to have intimate experiences of these elemental sounds that spontaneously emerge. However, at other times, the elemental constitution is a more prominent feature of the experiences. For example, when training on the aggregate of sensation, a person with an earth constitution will

naturally, suddenly, and without fabrication burst forth into verbalizing the sound of earth, “e srum.” Then, one comes to apprehend the smallest atoms of their body. In another half a month, one’s body will be able to pass unimpededly through mountains and cliffs, and they will have clear visions of underground realms. After another month, one experiences the so-called “close enjoyment of earth’s sound.” Appearances of the sounds of earth and their meanings manifest. Through its branches, one ascends to the location of [Brahmā’s] sound and masters the explanations of scriptural words.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 114.1-4

In this explanation, we find a string of experiences that relate to the earth element. First, one spontaneously expresses earth’s sounds. Then, one’s physicality (often associated with the earth element) is completely felt, down to its smallest parts. Their bodies then transform and are able to pass through solid stone and see places deep below the earth. The text then explains the term they use throughout, “the close enjoyment of the sound” of the elements. Here, this is understood as the manifestation of the elements

sounds and meanings as special appearances that can be perceived. These seem to align with Great Perfection ideals of self-emergent sensory phenomena and aesthetics of natural spontaneity, as these elemental sounds spontaneously appear.

The passage concludes with an acknowledgement of the connection between Brahmā's sounds and language. In this case, one masters the words of scripture through his sounds. This connection can be seen throughout but is cemented in a final contemplative practice on the alphabet – the very sounds of Brahmā's speech. This explanation for this contemplation is somewhat arcane, but it involves reciting the Sanskrit alphabet forwards and backwards, persisting in those strings of letters.

Thus, throughout these practices, we find that odd bits of language and letters are repeated over and over, losing conventional meanings or starting out with none, and giving way to new transcendent references featuring the self-emergence of elemental sound and experience.

5.2.1.2 Viṣṇu's Numbers

Viṣṇu's sounds are numbers, located among the enumerations we give our world. Similar to the contemplations on the sound of Brahmā, one is invited to recite the names of ever-increasing numbers continuously for 116 days. Here, the "limits of numbers" (*grangs kyi mtha* ') are felt and one arrives at the "inexpressibility of all phenomena" (*chos thams cad brjod du med pa*).³³⁶ The commentary offers that this collapses the duality of the mundane and transcendent worlds, just another enumeration.

With this in mind, we are led through four more sets of enumeration, each attended to

³³⁶ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 131.4.

contemplatively. One recites the two halves of the Sanskrit alphabet to attune to the ways Viṣṇu's transcendent numbers, i.e., those that have overcome the propensity for division, pervade the environment and its inhabitant beings' body, speech, and mind. These also attune practitioners to Viṣṇu's sounds in the movement of the elements over the divisions of seasonal time, as they go through cycles of engagement and decline.

The five senses are interrogated in deeply material contemplations that extend over months in which one gazes at colors, builds musical instruments, concocts perfumes, brews wine, and anoints the body with mud, ash, sandalwood water, and the breath of animals – one for each of the four elements. Eventually, the limits of each of these senses are overcome and one can see in incredible detail and distance; hear the sounds of living beings in the six realms; determine the truth of a substance from its smell; transform their tongue whereby everything they say is the natural sound of reality; and not only emanate bodies that continuously double but understand the situations of others merely by touching them.

Practices for the six realms of beings takes up elemental materials at certain times of the year prescribed in their accounting of mundane imagination. During spring one uses materials of water, during summer they use earth, fire in autumn, and wind in winter.³³⁷ They perform these elemental material practices, which are otherwise obscure in the text, for one year for each of the six types of living beings. Through such practice, they understand the various languages of the six types of beings and gain sensory superpowers from each. From the gods they gain visual superpowers, from the titans they gain aural

³³⁷ This is a somewhat different set of seasonal correspondences with the elements than is typical for this text, though it is not uncommon that elements get mixed up in the commentary.

superpowers, and so forth down each list.

Finally, the practices for the three types of mind are brief but involve the recitation of numbers. Saying the number “one” attends to the expressive mind and gives rise to the experience of essential singularity beyond multiplicity and partition. Saying “ten million” optimizes the forty-two mental factors of the conditioned mind. And saying random specific numbers reveals non-conceptual primordial knowing.

5.2.1.3 Kalapingka’s Melodies

The 360 melodies of this legendary King of birdsong array across the body, speech, and mind of living beings. Each division has its own unique set of practices that feature physical yogas, scripted intonations, and new ways to listen. Together, these practices can be considered a way to recalibrate the aesthetic sensibilities and embodied experiences of beings to resonate with the melodies that naturally reside within them.

The physical yogas of the bodies melodies are akin to *Magical Wheel* practices found throughout Tibetan Buddhist tantra. It features a tantric body visualized with four colored wheels (*'khor lo, cakra*) at the navel, heart, throat, and crown of the head. And it includes certain physical movements evocative of that practice, such as wildly twirling the arms and rolling the head back and forth. However, this is where the similarities end. While the wheels are points of contemplative focus, they are otherwise not interacted with. The activities of the practice instead revolve around producing sounds with one’s body and reciting the syllables of the Sanskrit alphabet, known to reside within the channels of the tantric body for the *Unimpeded Sound*.

This is broken down into four sets of practice, organized according to the wheel on which focus is placed. The first set orients to the generative wheel at the navel. A

practitioner snaps their fingers on both hands while reciting the first two letter families of the Sanskrit alphabet, *Ka* and *Ca*. The next set at the heart wheel instructs the practitioner to tap their chest with each finger on their right and left hands while reciting the next two letter families, *Ṭa* and *Ta*.

Here the practice shifts slightly, using the body in different ways. The third set on the ‘flavor’ wheel at the throat involves gazing in four directions as well as straightforward while melodically reciting the *Pa* family. Members of the semi-vowels and sibilants are recited while laying down and turning one’s body over to different sides. However, this is where the alphabet ends. For the final yoga on the head wheel, one stands in a variety of postures and recites mantric particles such as “hung,” “hig,” and “pé!” All together, these are said to purify the body’s transgressions, dismantle attachment to the body, give rise to heartfelt desires to make noise. This final result is described as the “key point of the body naturally connecting to the Great Perfection” as it echoes traditional Great Perfection preliminary practices (*‘khor ‘das ru shan*) in which adepts manipulate and exhaust their bodies while exclaiming any sounds that come to mind.

The contemplations on speech and mind are less clearly defined. The practice of melodic speech offers 120 combinations of intonations through which a practitioner should speak. Intonation descriptors such as “intensely filtered... mournful... long, short, subtle, clear... trembling, stiff... heartfelt... and laughing” are multiplied with four unstated intonation guidances (*‘dren pa*).³³⁸ They are further detailed with specific syllables to pair with the intonations, such that “*la lo* should be guided with long and soft

³³⁸ This term may be connected with the recitations led by Tibetan Buddhist ritual recitation masters, *Umdzes*, who are also called *‘dran pa*.

[intonations], *lo de* should be guided with clear and pure [intonations]” and so forth. By reciting these at a medium volume for four months, transcendent understanding will emerge in which “sounds [are realized to be] a maṇḍala of the Buddha’s single melodious speech.”³³⁹

Finally, contemplations on the 120 mental melodies involve slowing the body down to attune to its natural rhythms and sounds of breathing. For 120 days, one just focuses on their breathing. Then, one focuses externally onto the sounds of the four elements. This is combined with an attention to the ways sound in the form of letters comes from the body’s interior, is articulated with the parts of the mouth, and goes out into the world. Thus, the mind’s aesthetics are largely concerned with the attunement to the sonorities of both our bodies and our environments, and the linguistic communication between these internal and external domains.

5.2.1.4 Teacher’s Voice

The teacher’s voice does not offer a contemplative practice, other than hearing the sixty melodious sounds of the Buddha’s speech. As discussed in its mundane imagination, these sixty qualities target sixty sensory capacities of beings, purifying their senses and their ability to perceive the world. This has experiential implications. The commentary details a series of transcendent experiences one has in the six sensory variations of vision.

One sees hidden things with purified aural vision. One sees Mt. Meru with its four continents... with [purified] olfactory vision. One insightfully differentiates between that which is, and is not, [authentic] religious doctrine with [purified] gustatory vision. One sees complete emptiness through the primordial knowing of the tactile vision...

³³⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 138.3-140.1.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 150.4-6

The experience of vision is broken up into its six component sensory parts, such as aural vision, olfactory vision, and so forth. Each offers a different dimension to visual perception, though the commentary chooses not to theorize further on their distinctions. However, via listening to the sound of the teacher’s voice, new capacities for sensory perception are unlocked, including x-ray vision,³⁴⁰ cosmological vision, and seeing when someone is conveying authentic Buddhist teachings or is merely spouting falsehoods. The commentary indicates that such granularity in transcendent experience occurs with the other five senses and their component parts, though specifics are not provided. Overall, though, the commentary informs us that through listening to the sound of the teacher’s voice, one will “come to understand the meanings of the sonic locations [of the five descents] and their foundation”³⁴¹ in the sound of reality. Thus, listening to a qualified teacher does what it should – delivers students to a greater understanding of the world, and in this case, the sonic world.

5.2.2 *Listening to the Elements*

5.2.2.1 Environmental Listening

Listening to the Elements is a set of four distinct contemplative practices, one for each of the natural elements of water, earth, fire, and wind. These are the central sonic contemplations of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra. They promise both ‘common’ transcendent experiences, that sound more like superpowers including flight, immunity to fire, moving through stone, and clairvoyance; as well as the supreme transcendent

³⁴⁰ “Seeing hidden things” (*lkog tu gyur ba rnams mthong ba*) could refer to other abilities as well, such as seeing invisible things, or finding objects which have been hidden. X-ray vision is merely one option, though it is the most alive version of this in a Western imagination at least.

³⁴¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 151.4

accomplishments – namely the realization of the three awakened bodies of a Buddha.

The stages of training on the three [awakened bodies] are taught via connecting them with [their respective elemental] sounds, which are prioritized among the sensory qualities of the four elements. Those who wish for supreme accomplishments [should] train on the sound of earth in the [clacking of] round rocks, the sound of water in the sound of a roaring [river that flows] down a valley, the sound of fire in a mass of sandalwood flames, and the sound of wind in a [mountain-top house] with windows in [all] directions. In conjunction with the instructions found in the Secret Letters,³⁴² one will certainly attain accomplishment by training in [elemental] sound.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 275.1-3

This introduction to the set of contemplations foreshadows the types of material environments to which a practitioner will travel in search of these intense and quintessential sounds of the four elements. These include valleys that slope downwards from mountains, of which there are plenty in Tibet, which feature raging rivers; a pagoda style hut at the top of a mountain where the wind intensely whips and whirls; and huge bonfires that fiercely roar. Specific material components in these environments are also implicated, such as round rocks that you handle, passing them back and forth to produce the clacking sounds of the earth. Sandalwood logs are gathered for the fire, though in practice this would likely be other wood, since sandalwood is mostly found in Southern India.³⁴³ These environments and materials will prove to be central to the completion of

³⁴² The commentary references another brief commentary to these sets of elemental practice found in the *Conch Letters of the Heat Quintessence of Vimalamitra*. That text outlines the practice and provides further detail for several sonic, environmental, and physical factors. I will be using some of those explanations in correlation with those of the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, as the latter text relies on and references the former.

³⁴³ This is a possible example of the kind of virtue signaling that these texts perform around Indian authenticity. The *Unimpeded Sound* and its commentary are reputed to be of Indian origin, and thus a true teaching of Buddhism given the climate of critical inquiry around religious authenticity and indigenous Tibetan literature in the 11th-12th centuries in Tibet. Since sandalwood is known to be of Indian origin and is an important component in other Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices, though imported in smaller quantities, identifying the sandalwood forest as the environmental and material factors for the

the elemental practices.

While the other sensory qualities of the elements (*'byung ba bzhi'i 'dod yon rmans*) are encountered during these sensually immersive contemplations, sound is explicitly privilege for its capacity to lead beings to the realization of the three awakened bodies or dimensions – the reality body, the enjoyment body, and the emanation body – detailed in the *Unimpeded Sound's* sonic imagination of transcendence. Each awakened dimension corresponds to the sound of a specific element, though the fourth sound of wind applies to all three dimensions. However, overall, the listening practices emphasize their connection with the realization of the emanation body. Discussion on the transcendent imagination of elemental sound revealed that it “acts to directly emit the potencies of the three awakened bodies of the Buddha, and in particular, the power of the emanational body.”³⁴⁴ These elemental sounds carry the power of awakening within them, and through proper aural and physical attunement, mundane beings can experientially realize these awakened dimensions.

A practitioner chooses the appropriate contemplation from among these four elemental options based on a set of elemental calculations³⁴⁵ which indicate the practitioner's elemental constitution type,³⁴⁶ described in the mundane imagination of the text in Part One of this dissertation. After a period of general tantric preliminary

contemplation on fire's sound serves to both confirm the Indian authenticity of the text and mobilize other Tibetan Buddhist imaginations and experiences around religious practice and the smell of sandalwood.

³⁴⁴ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 145.1-2.

³⁴⁵ This can be understood in similar ways to Indian, Chinese, or Western astrological calculations, where one's date of birth and time in the calendrical cycle affect their physical body and the courses of action they should take. However, instead of basing these calculations on the movement of the stars, these are based on regular changes in the elemental makeup of the world, a subject the text deals with extensively.

³⁴⁶ Such as a fire constitution or a water constitution. Methods for understanding one's elemental constitution and the complex of factors, sub-types, and related effects are found throughout the text.

training,³⁴⁷ they travel to their respective element's primary location and listen intently to the sound of that element for a set period of time.

If the yogi's [elemental] constitution is water, [they should go] "to the roaring sound of water," indicating a well-formed southward-facing valley that slopes downward in which water flows down it fiercely and the sound of water grows most intensely... If the rushing sound of water is particularly strong, various activities will be accomplished.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 275.4-6

The setting for this contemplation is an isolated river-valley. It slopes downwards and faces south, indicating mountainous terrain. While the mundane imagination around water corresponds it to winter, the instructions for contemplation take a more practical approach. They advise that one performs this practice in later autumn, likely for two reasons: winter in Tibet would be far too cold for such a practice and the river would likely be frozen, and the Autumn follows the rainy season in Tibet, and it is likely that the sounds of these rivers would be more intense at that time.

The text indicates that the water should sound like "shwa shwa." During the practice, they should focus their aural perception in the center of the water and listen without distraction. They should squat with their ankles parallel, keep their eyes straight ahead without wavering in an 'elephant gaze,' They should continue like this for two and a half months before a set of transcendent sounds emerge in their experience.

In this way, practitioners with different elemental constitutions are also instructed to practice on their respective sounds. An earth-based person will go to an extremely

³⁴⁷ This involves gathering accumulations, offering to the teacher, etc. These generic descriptions align with normative Tibetan preliminary practices that are used today, however the exact nature of these preliminaries is not detailed in these sections.

isolated place and find round stones or make clay balls, listening to the noise as they hit one another for seventeen months. A practitioner with a fire constitution will go to a sandalwood forest, collect several dozen large logs,³⁴⁸ and start a raging bonfire, listening to its roar for twenty months. Finally, a person whose primary constitution is wind will climb to the top of a mountain, to a house that is open on all sides, and listen to the wind for sixteen months. After three or four months, the wind is said to “wear you out, [and] only then will you experience the sound of wind, extremely piercing and utterly fierce.”³⁴⁹

After establishing these initial settings and contemplations on the sounds of the material world, the text starts to detail the kinds of transcendent sounds that emerge from such dedicated elemental listening. The text does not make clear distinctions delineating when the mundane material sounds end and the transcendent sounds begin, preferring to let those boundaries remain open, as we might imagine the experience of elemental listening to slowly unfold.

5.2.2.2 Transcendent Experiences

Each of these contemplations gives way to unique experiences for their listeners. We might categorize the kinds of experiences that emerge into four classes: multi-sensorial experiences (often in the body), transcendent aural experiences that mobilize sonic imaginations of the *Five Descents*, physical transformations, and transcendent realizations. Each practice moves through these different stages of experience after the initial period of listening.

³⁴⁸ The exact number is based on their age.

³⁴⁹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, 2.2.3.1.1.2.25.5.

Listening to water brings about kinesthetic experiences of agitation, trembling, and bliss; visual experiences such as pure visions or seeing through deluded appearances, and tactile sensations of softness. However, its primary experiences are transcendent aural experiences. These revolve around the musical sounds of the Sky-Dancer Ḍākīnī Goddesses of the five Buddha families – the Awakened, Adamantine, Jewel, Lotus, and Action families we encountered in the *Secret Matrix*.³⁵⁰ These include verbal Sanskrit phrases announcing their role within the transcendent pantheon such as “*Buddha dakini darma kasu*” and “*Vajra Dakini Ngadu Puka Ho*,”³⁵¹ as well as descriptions of the musical qualities of their voices.

Then in half a month, the first sound of the dakinis will resound, “Bhuddha Dakkini Dharma Kasu” in long tones. Then, one will hear their natural melody, which [sounds] extremely tormented, refined, subtle, and tonal.³⁵² Thus, even the body will tremble and [that trembling will] speed up. One will start to feel intoxicated. Then, they will lose feeling in their body.³⁵³

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 276.4-5

The Sky Dancer of the Awakened family sings with an elongated and melodic, through haunting, strained, and subtle voice. The other four goddesses express sounds like musical instruments: a piwang lute, which is a small three stringed bowed instrument of Tibet, a flute, a zither, and a drum. With each, another description entails the kinds of

³⁵⁰ It is interesting to note the change in order here. The Buddha and Vajra families are often switched in the first and second position, depending on the emphasis of the text. The Vajra family in the center indicates an aesthetics of power in the tantra, as was seen in the *Secret Matrix*. The Buddha family in the center can indicate an aesthetics of natural awakening. It is also interesting to remember that in the presumed maṇḍala for Brahmā in the *Unimpeded Sound*, the Vajra family would be at the center. See the previous examination of this in Part One for reference.

³⁵¹ *The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 276.6.*

³⁵² *Dbyangs rab tu gdung ba dang/ bsing ba dang/ ‘phra zhing gdangs pa thos*

³⁵³ *Reg ‘joms kyi myong ba*

sensory, physical, and mental experiences felt after hearing these transcendent sounds, such as special visions, blissful speech, and mental ecstasy.

Upon hearing these resound, they will experience them as bliss, great bliss, and utter bliss. If the yogi constantly familiarizes themselves with these kinds of sounds, they will accomplish the authentic dynamic qualities of the emanation body.

The Blazing & Illuminating Lamp, 277.4-5

Through continued listening to these transcendent aural experiences, one physically and mentally transforms, experiencing ever increasing levels of bliss in their bodies and gaining a set of six superpowers (*mgon shes*) including clairvoyance, flight, gigantic growth, and lightning speed. Finally, they attain the qualities of the emanational body – the first of the three awakened bodies.

While these qualities are said to be limitless, the text also details several, such as constant buoyancy in water and immunity to drowning. These directly correspond to the sound of water to which they listened, a theme that will continue with the other elemental practices. Other qualities include capacity over others, such as controlling them or improving their cosmological situations, moving the six types of living beings to higher realms of existence with increased freedom from emotional turmoil.

Likewise, listening to the other elements primes similar types of experiences. Physically, listening to the sound of earth evokes a cooling of the body. Aurally, one begins to hear the sounds of beings suffering in the six realms of cyclic existence, as well as Brahmā's voice. Their bodies transform such that they can pass through solid stone and mountains, an experience that again connects to the elemental focus. Finally, they attain the qualities of the enjoyment body – the second of the trio of awakened bodies.

The fire's roar causes kinesthetic sensations of shaking, levitating, and feeling

suffused with bliss. Transcendent sounds of Viṣṇu's voice are heard along with the fierce sounds of demons and wrathful goddesses. Fire's physical transformation enables one to burn anything they touch and heat their body's interior enough to destroy anything harmful within. Last, they attain the qualities of the reality body – the foundational dimension of awakening.

Finally, listening to the sound of wind initially makes one feels uneasy in their mind and body as their skin crawls and develops goosebumps while their limbs and tantric body channels shake. The wind's whistles become the melodious sounds of the kalapingka bird, energetically crying "u ung ung" and "yam yam yam," a mantric particle associated with the torrential destruction of wind. And the dynamic qualities of all three awakened bodies manifest within.

Chapter 6: Contemplative Reflections

The sonic contemplative practices of the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* are strikingly different. The *Secret Matrix* outlines a linear progression in which one visualizes transcendent beings and palaces that arise from letters, both alphabetical and arcane. Mantra recitation then activates these visualized and auralized transformations while sexual yoga provides a physical and aesthetic basis for them. Transcendent beings are verbally called upon and exhorted. One declares their identification as the Buddha through special mantras, taking on their imagined transcendent qualities. And finally, these sonic transformations, exhortations, and identifications trigger dissolution into blazing color and wisdom.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead offers an array of contemplations that attend to the many ways sound impacts our world linguistically, numerically, aesthetically, environmentally, and religiously. They invite single-syllable recitations, sensory engagement with the material world as it changes through the seasons, singing melodies and playing the instrument of the body, listening to the sounds of the elements, and passive reception of doctrinal instruction where only the sound of the teacher's voice matters. Each of these five sets of practices are customizable for a practitioner's individual needs and provide unique but intertwined contemplations. And while all the practices intersect each other, they all point to elemental sound as the pinnacle of sonic contemplation. Listening to the sounds of the elements engages material environments, where natural sounds unfold into transcendent experiences and transmit the frequencies of the awakened bodies. Acoustic awakening for the *Unimpeded Sound* is simply attuning to these resonances.

While these contemplative approaches and philosophies around sound differ wildly, I argue that they are both working in three similar philosophical discourses, albeit with often differing conclusions. We have been following two of these – sonic epistemologies and cosmologies – throughout these two texts’ sonic imaginations of the mundane and transcendent. Within their contemplative practices, we will discover how they are taking up their imagined mundane and transcendent epistemologies and cosmologies, creating atmospheres in which practitioners can use sound to move from the divided structures of the mundane world that produce confusion to the transcendent forms of knowing reality and divine pantheons. In all, these sonic contemplative programs thus aim for soteriological results, the methods for which, I argue, constitute a fourth discourse in these texts that replaces their construction of ontologies based on sound necessary for their imaginative projects. In the final section, then, we will explore the divergent pathways through which sound can be used to achieve liberation. Thus, through attending to these three discourses, we will uncover the divergent ways these traditions use sound to effect transformations through meaningful and nonsensical expression; reinforce and collapse a construction of the world divided between external environments, internal beings, mundane existence, and transcendent quiescence; and deploy sound for soteriological goals through a variety of multi-sensorial media each with its own implications on contemplation.

To accomplish their contemplative goals, I contend that both traditions mobilize their mundane and transcendent sonic imaginations in ways that affect all three broader concerns. The *Secret Matrix* takes special care to place the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet – the core sounds of their sonic imaginations – into the visualized space of the maṇḍala.

They then transform these letters into mantric particles, explaining how each one fits with their corresponding letter's mundane and transcendent imaginations. The mundane world is reconfigured through these contemplative orientations and practitioners identify with transcendent attributes. The *Unimpeded Sound* cross-references their quintet of sonic imaginations, thereby incorporating ideas of language, numbers, melodies, and teachings into contemplations on elemental sound, and likewise notions of elemental sound into contemplations of the other four. The resulting experiences of such contemplations describe the ways practitioners embody these imaginations such that they overcome mundane limits imposed by the five types of sound and realize transcendent dimensions within themselves.

Such mobilizations of these imaginations encode the sounds of contemplation with the epistemological potential of sonic transmission, transformation, and revelation. They further foreground the sonic cosmological constructions of the world which can be manipulated, collapsed, and transformed through sonic practices of recitation, auralization, and listening. Finally, they inform the ways sound can be used as a pathway for soteriological goals by highlighting sound's own capacities, such as communication and transmission, and connecting it to other media of contemplation such the remaining senses, the body, and modes of interiority and exteriority. Together, they take the imaginations developed by both textual traditions and turn them into experiences that practitioners can embody.

6.1 Realizing Epistemologies of Sound

Throughout the mundane and transcendent sonic imaginations of both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, we have witnessed the capacity of sound to both conceal

reality and reveal it. In their contemplative practices, both texts play with these capacities, moving sound between its two epistemological models. Thus, they instruct practitioners in methods to transform their ordinary ways of knowing, limited by sound, and attend to sound in new ways to realize new systems of revelatory knowledge.

This process is essential for their goals of establishing realized practitioners through their imaginal knowledge systems. Ganeri speaks of the problem of mere texts and overcoming experiential epistemologies of concealment and decides that the “cure for misconception is never simply to announce the right view.”³⁵⁴ Instead, he finds that Buddhist traditions historically use methods that are more engaging, complicated, and tangential than dialogical arguments in order to for the practitioner to realize such new epistemological orientations in embodied ways. And as Bianchi and Manzo describe for environmental sound art, the aesthetic idea or even presentation is not enough for the work to effect the kinds of affect intended. They write that “in order for sound to become more than just the physical phenomenon of vibrating particles, ... it must also be received by a sentient being who is able to cognitively translate those vibrations into psychological experience; thus, the actualization of sound [art]... necessitates the existence of the *listener*.”³⁵⁵ We can consider that the listeners of our texts can thus take in the sounds prescribed in these contemplative practice and filter them with the expressed worlds of mundane and transcendent imaginations, thereby translating those sounds into affective and religious experiences that allow them to embody the desired and imagined transformations.

³⁵⁴ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 2.

³⁵⁵ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xix.

Studies on visionary experience in South Asia have reflected on the contemplative uses of light that mobilize larger sensory epistemological imaginations of the mundane and transcendent worlds. Persian Illuminationist theory describes their transcendent visionary experiences as being “intuitively disclosed” by divine light.³⁵⁶ Hindu temple worship, which privileges visual interaction between deities substantiated as images and onlooking human devotees, sensorially grants participants access to divine beings and their blessings as “visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning.”³⁵⁷ Abhinavagupta considers tantric visionary contemplations that allow practitioners to move from the limited reality of human awareness towards interior ways of absorbing into the light of Śiva, thus establishing inner recognitions of Śiva as true reality. These contemplations unfold into the exterior world as well, whereby the fires stoked by these inner luminous states can burn away the obscurity of the objective world.³⁵⁸ Finally, in Tibetan Great Perfection traditions, visionary experiences of emptiness in darkness allows practitioners to gain “a visceral experience of emptiness.”³⁵⁹ In these ways, epistemological and other philosophical ideas can be known through experience, fundamentally transforming the ways religious practitioners perceive the world.

Mantra has also historically been a useful contemplative and sensory bridge between the experiences of such opposing epistemological models in tantric practice. Part of this success is in their departure from normal linguistic modes. Often, mantras will include

³⁵⁶ Kapstein, “Introduction to Part One” of *The Presence of Light*, 2; and Ziai, “Suhrawardī on Knowledge and the Experience of Light.”

³⁵⁷ Eck, *Darśan*, 3.

³⁵⁸ Muller-Ortega, “Luminous Awareness,” 64-65.

³⁵⁹ Hatchell, *Naked Seeing*, 116.

nonlinguistic letters such as those of the alphabet or mantric particles like *Om* and *Hung* which are all considered forms of primordial sonic power and thus are efficacious.³⁶⁰ Nonsense or inarticulate sounds including non-Sanskrit syllables can also be considered “nearer to the Absolute... because they are farther from the norm of articulate rule-governed speech... used for mundane, inferior, purposes.”³⁶¹ These ensure that normal, rational, modes of understanding are denied, leaving space for transcendent epistemologies, though as Abé notes, those require ritual chanting and somatic exercises, not mere reading, for their divine power to be experienced and embodied.³⁶² However, sound and mantras do not always have to be spoken aloud to be heard and be effective at engendering the desired modes of transcendent epistemologies. Visualized, auralized, or sounds heard in mystical (possibly non-external) ways can also be “embodied experiences that are highly immersive and intense; essentially, they may often feel equally real to equivalent sensory experience... [and, moreover,] *are* equally as real.”³⁶³ Thus, all of the sounds uttered, auralized, and heard in the contemplative practices of both of our traditions, even those in virtual or extra-sensory domains, can be implicated in this process of opening up new ways of knowing reality for Buddhist practitioners of these traditions.

As a part of this process of transitioning between experiences of these two epistemologies, it is useful to continue to think with the idea of affective atmospheres. LaBelle remarks that the atmosphere “opens up an experiential form of reception that

³⁶⁰ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 3.

³⁶¹ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 3.

³⁶² Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 12.

³⁶³ Grimshaw and Garner, *Sonic Virtuality*, 17.

also exceeds human perception.”³⁶⁴ Following this thought, we can consider transcendent revelation in terms of such new forms of reception that go beyond our ordinary ways of knowing the world. Affective atmospheres arise as a part of the formation of subjectivities that see the world in a particular way and come in between normal distinctions of subjects and objects, allowing for new ways of perceiving their relationality.³⁶⁵ This aligns with moves that these texts make to disentangle systems of mundane meaning and experientially ascribe new orders of knowledge. Via the spaces of intensity created by affective atmospheres, such transcendent meanings can overwhelm our mundane perception, experientially changing our perception of the world.³⁶⁶ Finally, they help us think about the source of this transformation in knowing, distributing agency between subject and object – religious practitioners and sounds – and finding that the sources of affective change are not reducible to either.³⁶⁷

In the contemplative prescriptions of our texts, we find both traditions mobilizing previously deluded sounds into recitations, auralizations, and listening practices in order to transform practitioners’ experiences of the mundane world and make real the revelatory promises of sound. I argue that the texts enable this in two primary ways—through attending to the connections between sound and meaning and between sound and activity. In these texts, sound is infused with new meanings that align with transcendent imaginations and is stripped of the meanings of mundane imagination in turn. These meaningful and nonsense sounds, charged with the epistemological discourses of the

³⁶⁴ LaBelle, “Sharing Architecture,” 186.

³⁶⁵ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 78.

³⁶⁶ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 79.

³⁶⁷ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 80.

previous imaginations, then incite activities of transformation and liberation. Sound is thus experientially shown to be capable of revealing divine knowledge and enacting the kinds of transcendent transformation that their imaginations suggest.

6.1.1 *The Meaning of Sounds*

In the mundane imagination of the *Secret Matrix*, referential meaning was a problem. It was cited as the source of confusion leading to the mundane world. The letters of the alphabet were implicated in this process, each leading to a distinct aspect of our conceptual grasping onto the mundane. But those same linguistic sounds were also shown to vibrate the world in new ways, disintegrating these fundamental delusions. In the contemplative practices of this text, the letters of the alphabet were transformed into mantric particles. These particles were connected to longer mantras which the commentary explained according to the previous sonic imaginations of transcendence – in particular the major iconography and name of each deity. In this way, these mantric sounds were imbued with the many reference points found in the *Secret Matrix*'s transcendent imagination.

This appears to be an important process for the *Secret Matrix*'s move between mundane and transcendent epistemologies. Refabricating the reference points of such sounds to align with a transcendent imagination allows the text to freely use mantra as revelatory. Instead of language occluding reality in confused meanings, it now can activate transcendence through its connection with appropriate meaning. As the mantras are spoken, they are further linked to the imaginations of the *Secret Matrix*. These sounds are used to undo the specific concerns associated with the letters of the alphabet in the mundane imagination. For example, the letter *Ṭha* is associated with the aggregate of

physical form in the mundane imagination. This letter becomes mantric particle *Hung* in the contemplative correspondence and is coded with the Adamantine family of Akshobya buddha. Likewise, his consort, Samantabhadrī, who is connected with the element of space and the letter *Tha*, is re-envisioned in this contemplative correspondence. Thus, her new letter is *Mum*.

When these mantras are used in sexual yoga practice, they give rise to these deities, who purify the aspects of mundane imagination to which they correspond. In this way, they dismantle grasping to the aggregate of physical form and the element of space as autonomously real. The rest of the deities of the transcendent pantheon are encoded with their mundane imagination correspondences likewise. In this way, the new referential meanings of sounds become important for the affective procedures that the *Secret Matrix* provides practitioners. The capacity of these syllables and phrases is directly aligned with their imaginations, and thus the way they can be felt in contemplations is both partitioned and directed by those meanings. Meaning is thus shown to be of central importance to the *Secret Matrix*, both in its capacity to delude, and in its power to transform.

In contrast, the *Unimpeded Sound* often strips the meaning of the sounds used in their contemplative practices to create space for new forms of transcendent epistemology. The referential capacity of sound in the mundane imagination that leads to straying, such as with language and enumerations, is dismantled through continuous recitation leading to semantic satiation, or sometimes even beginning with nonsense noise. In the contemplative recitations of Brahmā's linguistic sounds, the word "atom" is connected to the aggregate of physical form as its limiting parameter, its most basic building block. By reciting this word over and over, its referential meaning of physical form appears to melt

away. Other syllables recited in the contemplations on the other four aggregates begin with this lack of meaning, though they have the appearance of Tibetan forms of spelling. By starting from such a point, these contemplations instigate a pattern of verbalization with regard to the aggregates that similarly lacks referential meaning. This is heightened when reciting the alphabet at the end of Brahmā's contemplations. There, it does not aim to encode new reference into these letters. Instead, by reciting many times backwards and forwards, the foundational building blocks of language start to lose their meaning. Likewise, by reciting Viṣṇu's numbers for over 100 days, these numbers, the constituents of enumerations, lose their points of reference. Thus, the commentary cites sutrā to express how crossing beyond these limits of numbers brings one to know the inexpressible reality of all phenomena. In this way, the enumerations that divide and catalog our world are deconstructed.

We can understand the relationship between practitioners' experience of the material world and the sounds of the elements in this same way. The references of the external environment to which the sounds of the elements point in their mundane imagination dissolve away under exclusive aural attention for months at a time. This process of dissolution targets the boundaries between the exterior world and the living beings within, between the objective and subjective realms. As we will see, this collapse between the exterior and interior domains is a vital move for the *Unimpeded Sound* as well as the *Secret Matrix*. It is in these nebulous atmospheres that subjects and objects can be transcended, and awakening can be realized. However, this is not simply a process of stripping references, it is rather the creation of new transcendent references. Throughout the text, it claims to present contemplations on "sounds and their meanings."

The meanings of these elemental sounds thus shift from mundane reference to an expansive experiential understanding of the transcendent world and access to transcendent embodiments.

Both texts use complex processes to deal with the problem of referential meaning that marked their mundane epistemologies of concealment. They remove the mundane reference points of the sounds of language, numbers, and elements, and re-infuse these sounds with transcendent meaning. The *Secret Matrix* accomplishes this through closely connecting with the sounds of the mundane imagination to mantric particles and the deities of the transcendent pantheon. This happens via descriptive correlation and through the kinds of activities these mantras enact. The *Unimpeded Sound* targets different types of mundane sounds and strips their meaning, but in turn delivers new meanings of transcendence that correlate with transcendent imagination, infused through the experiences gained in contemplation.

6.1.2 *The Activity of Sounds*

Transformations of sonic epistemologies are also demonstrated in the things sound can do. While previously, these sounds with their mundane references served as tools of straying and confusion, now with their transcendent imaginations mobilized, they are shown to two produce transformative effects. Sound is used throughout the *Secret Matrix* in moments of transition and change. The sounds of *A* and *Kṣa* combine to bring forth the letters of the alphabet and array them throughout the maṇḍala. Desire for the sexual yoga process is aroused through romantic communication of gendered mantra phrases. Reciting each mantra activates the sonic particles that come from *bodhicitta* sperm and transforms them into their corresponding deity.

These deities are made manifest and stabilized via the sounds *Ja* and *Om, Ā*, and *Hung*. Once the maṇḍala is fully formed, the wisdom beings are invited, invoked, and made inseparable with the four specialized sounds of *Ja, Hung, Bam*, and *Ho*.

Practitioners then identify with such transcendent beings through sound. Each of the five primary Buddhas of the maṇḍala and the embodiments of their five attributes, both categories elaborated in the transcendent imagination, are experientially identified with via mantras that proclaim that fact and with auralizations that place their corresponding letters throughout the tantric body. Finally, the commentary notes how the expression of all of these sounds ignite the process of dissolution into these transcendent forms with blazing colors in acoustically driven awakening.

The *Unimpeded Sound* uses its sounds to produce different activities and transformations. Reciting and listening to these sources of sound produces transcendent experiences that both breakdown mundane categories and alight physical, aural, and transformative experiences. Reciting Brahmā's letters produces aural experiences of elemental sound, attending to Viṣṇu's sensory enumerations supercharges the senses, playing the kalapīṅka's melodies cleanses the body and gives rise to new modes of aesthetic listening, and receiving the teacher's voice purifies each granular aspect of one's sensory capacities. Listening to the sounds of the elements in particular triggers a host of transcendent experiences. One's physical body shakes, suffers, floats, and fills with bliss. Practitioners begin to hear sounds that align with each source of sound in the transcendent imagination. Listening to water unfolds into the melodies of goddesses from each of the five buddha families who teach with awakened voices. Listening to earth likewise brings forth the sounds of Brahmā. Listening to fire unfolds into Viṣṇu's speech

and wrathful cries. And listening to the sound of wind, one begins to hear the call of the kalapingka soaring in the air. Finally, each of these aural experiences transmit the power of the three awakened bodies. Via attuning to their sounds, those bodies self-emerge in our experience, changing our perception of the world and ourselves.

6.2 Contemplating Sonic Cosmologies

Second, the cosmologies of the mundane and transcendent worlds, the exterior environments and the beings within, are activated, experienced, and collapsed via contemplative practice in both tantras. I argue that there are two primary ways this occurs: through creating real or virtual environments that integrate the sounds and structures of their sonic cosmologies and which serve as the contemplative setting; and the manipulation of those cosmologies via practices of listening, reciting, auralizing, and visualizing such that the distinctions between subjects and objects are dissolved in ways patterned by the respective mundane imaginations, unfolding into realizations of transcendent cosmologies.

Classen writes that “by imbuing sensory values with social [and, in our case, religious] values, cultures attempt to ensure that their members will perceive the world aright. When sensory orders express cosmic orders, cosmologies are... lived through one’s own body.”³⁶⁸ This involves two factors: a structure of sensorily imagined cosmologies and the perceivable world – “the soundscape as... both a world and a culture to make sense of it.”³⁶⁹ This aligns with a typology of three levels of sonic environments

³⁶⁸ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, 137.

³⁶⁹ Rosalind I. J. Hackett, “Sound, Music, and the Study of Religion” in *Temenos Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 48, no.1 (2012): 18. Here, Hackett is describing the work of Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 2004.

– the acoustic properties of sound, sensorial perception, and interpretation based on cultural decodings of the sounds in the environment.³⁷⁰ In religious cultures, this all “conveys a time and space emplacement where both sound production and sound perception combine for powerful religious experience and communication with the divine.”³⁷¹

The design of such sensory spaces can augment this process as well. The field of acoustic design aims to study both the sounds of a soundscape as well as the symbolism encoded into those sounds in order to plan environments that nurture people’s lives.³⁷² Aural architects intently create aural spaces that induce desired feelings such as “exhilaration, contemplative tranquility, heightened arousal, or a harmonious and mystical connection to the cosmos.”³⁷³ The tie between the spaces themselves, their symbols, and desire feelings is often strong. In environmental sound art, the location “becomes a primary contextual element and is often integral to the realization” of the work.³⁷⁴ They even create site-specific works that are designed to be heard in a certain location to contribute to the work’s perceived meaning, or even works that “function as autonomous sonic environments in themselves.”³⁷⁵ Thus, acoustically designed spaces, even virtual ones that become autonomous environments, can locate aesthetic or religious meanings, such as cosmological systems, within a sensorially perceivable world that can be experienced by listeners.

³⁷⁰ Farina, *Soundscape Ecology*, 108.

³⁷¹ Hackett, “Sound, Music, and the Study of Religion,” 18. Here, Hackett is invoking the work of Dorthea Schulz, “Soundscape” in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, 2008.

³⁷² Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 4.

³⁷³ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 5.

³⁷⁴ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xi.

³⁷⁵ Bianchi and Manzo, *Environmental Sound Artists*, xxiv.

In religious settings, we see this play out with incense in Chinese temples, which helps to transform the temple atmosphere into a sacred mountain where human-divine communication can occur.³⁷⁶ Tzotzil rituals need heat in their environments, which can be provided by cooking, burning incense, or growing flowers.³⁷⁷ In Tibetan Buddhism, humans can activate sensory objects in ritual settings via mantra and visualizations to invoke actual Buddhas to merge with those objects which become the foci of worship.³⁷⁸ Both of these examples take up specially chosen and arranged sensory environments and objects to substantiate figures from religious cosmologies and locate them in a ritually sealed atmosphere, making them real for practitioners.

This leads to the second way cosmologies are activated in contemplation. In such settings, sensory practices can be employed to connect cosmological imaginations with embodied experiences. Invoking Buddhist deities into sensory objects is a prime example of this, especially since it is often performed by mantra. The expression of mantras is often meant to directly engage with members of a transcendent pantheon and locates practitioners within the cosmic hierarchy structured by that pantheon.³⁷⁹ Padoux reflects that “a cosmic imaginary structure is thus built up... using the mantras embodying these cosmic elements.”³⁸⁰ Sonically building such expressed worlds onto our perceivable reality can happen externally in ritual spaces or internally, “‘cosmicing’ [the practitioner’s body] by place on it the different parts... constituting the cosmos.”³⁸¹ Any

³⁷⁶ Arthur, “Wafting Incense and Heavenly Foods,” 37.

³⁷⁷ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, 124.

³⁷⁸ James Gentry, “Liberation Through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 50 (2019):120.

³⁷⁹ Flood, “Foreward” to *Tantric Mantras*, x.

³⁸⁰ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 6.

³⁸¹ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 7.

sonic space – natural environments, bodies, and virtual worlds – can reflect the mundane and transcendent cosmic orders, and as sounds are manipulated within them, practitioners are able to move through these different cosmological schemes.

Padoux informs us that in tantra, “there are no absolute distinctions, no discontinuity between the human and the cosmic.”³⁸² These lack of distinctions, the willingness of tantra to move between cosmological levels of exterior and interior, mundane and transcendent, can be considered with our theoretical lens of affective atmospheres. These create enveloping spaces that overwhelm the divisions of subject and object, human and non-human,³⁸³ erasing their distinctions³⁸⁴ and establishing new a new order of space-time³⁸⁵ structured by the expressed world of imaginations.

These can be especially efficacious when there is a consistency between space, sound, and imagination. The idea of the territorial refrain, discussed in in critical theory by Deleuze and Guattari,³⁸⁶ uses the musical notion of a return to the familiar to describe the way the sense of a space can develop around patterned sensory and affective intensities, both forming new territories and deforming old ones. In her investigation of video game spaces, Andiloro implicates the territorial refrain in the production of affective atmospheres. She finds that the affective and sensory components of refrains as they gravitate around particular motifs and themes are atmospheric in nature. Ultimately, for Andiloro, affective atmospheres can help make sense of the experience of players as they

³⁸² Padoux, *Vac*, xi.

³⁸³ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 78.

³⁸⁴ LaBelle, “Sharing Architecture,” 186.

³⁸⁵ LaBelle, “Sharing Architecture,” 184

³⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 323.

enter into and engage with imagined worlds.³⁸⁷

We can consider the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras with these ideas of the connection of spaces, imaginations, and listeners in affective atmospheres that both take up physical and aural spaces, reinscribing them with varying cosmologies that can be accessed and moved through in contemplative practice. Both construct mundane and transcendent worlds along an axis of the exterior environments and their beings from who live within. In the imaginations of these texts, these four quadrants are theorized to connect at certain locations. Individuals meet with the sensory world through letters as their five senses and psycho-physical aggregates find correlation in the five elements and sensory objects of the material world. The collapse of exteriors and interior, subject and object, are thus shown to be a portal from the mundane to the transcendent.

These theories become embodied practices in the contemplations of mantra recitation and elemental listening. To set the stage for these collapsing experiences to unfold, these texts first establish atmospheric settings that support such contemplative realizations. The maṇḍala and the natural environment are evocative locations that hold within them each of the four quadrants of imagination. Thus, contemplative practices within those locations are better able to mobilize these cosmological sets of knowledge.

6.2.1 Contemplative Settings

In the *Secret Matrix* tantra, the maṇḍala is the site of contemplation. The letters of the Sanskrit alphabet through which mundane and transcendent imaginations were weaved are arrayed along this maṇḍala by visually pairing the corresponding letters for each letter

³⁸⁷ Andiloro, "This Must Be the Place," 224-225.

family. *Ṭha* is paired with *Tha*, *Ṭa* to *Ta*, and so on. In this way, the imaginations of the mundane exterior and interior worlds can be linked. The level of importance for each mundane concept of environment and living being is organized within the maṇḍala by radiating from the center. In the core, we find the five psycho-physical aggregates paired with the five external elements. Beyond that we find the five sensory perceptions likewise linked to the sensory objects, sensory organs to time, and the four aspects of the tactile domain paired with the four erroneous philosophical views.

Each of the transcendent beings in the maṇḍala are in sexual consort pairs, a visual indication of the coemergence of both subjective and objective realms. This metaphoric presentation of sexual union as the coming together of subject and object, living beings and their environments, is intensified with the broader practical setting of the maṇḍala – the physical sexual union of two practitioners. It is at the meeting of their sexual bodies with of the material support of the male sperm in the environment of a female womb that this maṇḍala manifests. Thus, cosmological imaginations that join these two realms are viscerally felt by the practitioners.

The *Unimpeded Sound* does not take up the sexual aesthetic which Mahāyoga interpretation of the *Secret Matrix* mobilizes to bring together environments and living beings. Instead, the *Unimpeded Sound* places living beings within natural environments, reflecting their own aesthetics of natural spontaneity and ease. However, the atmospheres created in these environments function in similar ways in the meeting of subjective experience and objective materiality. The environments for most of the practices found within the five descents of sound are not described. However, external environments take central importance within the contemplations of listening to the elements.

Each practice has its own distinct description of place, where the matters of the mundane world are left behind, and one can directly meet the sounds of the material world. Practitioners with water constitutions meditate next to a river that rushes swiftly down a mountainside. Those with bodies of earth find isolated places where the quieter sounds of clinking rocks can be heard. Beings constituted of fire find a sandalwood forest and build a blazing fire. And those with wind as their primary form of embodiment climb to the top of a mountain where harsh gusts of wind pummel them from all sides. In these places, the interior aspects of practitioner's elemental bodies find external connections to the environment, supporting the contemplative unfolding *Unimpeded Sound's* imaginations.

6.2.2 *Collapsing the Construction*

In such settings, the contemplative practices of the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* enact their cosmological connections. The sexual union of practitioners is ritualized and made transcendent via the call and response of mantras that identify the two partners as deities of the maṇḍala who represent exterior and interior worlds. Mantric particles corresponding alphabetical pairs emerge together into the maṇḍala and are activated by the recitation of their joint of mantras. In this way, the five primary male buddhas, for example, do not manifest first, but appear together with their female counterparts throughout the progression of the practice.

In each of these pairings, the activities of these deities reflect this joining of interior and exterior mundane imaginations. Thus, the grasping to both the individual conceptual reality of the five psycho-physical aggregates and the environmental conceptual misunderstanding of the five elements are attended to jointly. Likewise, as sensory

perception is dissolved, their sensory objects are simultaneously targeted. Subject and object pairs are thus seen meeting and dissolving the mundane grasping that separates them. The transcendent wisdom beings are then invited into these paired forms. With four special sounds of invitation and merger, this dissolution of subject and object becomes an embodied experience of transcendence – one is the Buddha in co-emergent sexual union.

Within the natural environments prescribed by the *Unimpeded Sound*, one casts their aural attention into the center of their relevant exterior element's sounds. When the rushing of water, the blazing fire, or the whipping winds overwhelm one's sensory experience, the distinction between subjective perception and material objects begins to dissolve. It is at this time that transcendent experiences of both the external sensory world and one's interior embodiment start to emerge, connecting the elements of bodies to environments. Human bodies start to shake, blaze, and be filled with bliss. The external soundscapes give way to the self-emergence of transcendent voices, wails, and shouts. Elemental sound thus experienced with transcendent references hit the practitioner's ears in new ways continuing these transformations. The potency of the three awakened bodies is transmitted via these sounds of the elements. Thus, the interaction between listening subjects and objective sonic realities gives rise to the embodiment of awakening that is free from such dualistic grasping. In this way, moving from mundane to transcendent cosmological visions, acoustic awakening is achieved.

6.3 Sonic Soteriologies

The way these texts contemplatively transform experiences of mundane sonic epistemologies and cosmologies to transcendent experiences is obviously, by this point, through sound. Sound is shown to be capable of awakening practitioners to new ways of

perceiving and structuring their worlds and themselves. In this way, practices of sound are soteriological in nature – freeing living beings from the confusion and suffering of the mundane world.

There is a significant history of soteriological uses of sound and the senses in tantric and Tibetan traditions of which these texts are a part. In Hindu tantra, mantras “appear as privileged instruments for the return to the source of the energy of the word...bring[ing] together both the practically effective and creative, and the transcendental and liberating, powers of the Word.”³⁸⁸ Contemplative implementations of sound have thus been considered as practical pathways towards transcending our limited world of suffering and realizing foundational reality – the source of transcendent sound.

In Tibetan tantric contexts, hearing and other sensory modes were heralded as effective soteriological paths, even without formal meditation. Tibetologists James Gentry³⁸⁹ and Holly Gayley³⁹⁰ describe the liberative properties and practices of sensory objects that become crystallized in Tibetan Buddhism, especially the Great Perfection, as sets of four, six, or even eleven sensory liberations. Most commonly among these lists are liberation through seeing (statues, stupas, mantras), liberation through hearing (mantras, dhāraṇīs, instruction manuals), liberation through wearing (yantra diagrams, mantra and dhāraṇī amulets), and liberation through tasting (pills made from Buddhist relics).³⁹¹ ‘Liberation’ here can denote both soteriological effects as well as pragmatic or karmic effects, freeing one from negative circumstances and supporting a better rebirth.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ Padoux, *Vac*, 85.

³⁸⁹ Gentry, “Liberation Through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice,” 73-131.

³⁹⁰ Holly Gayley, “Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism,” *Numen* 54 (2007): 459-499.

³⁹¹ Gentry, “Liberation Through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice,” 78.

³⁹² Gentry, “Liberation Through Sensory Encounters,” 121.

It is notable, though, that many of these different sensorial liberations involve sound. Mantras are implicated in a variety of sensory forms as heard or recited audible sounds, visual sounds that are written down, and tactile sounds when those pieces of paper containing the visual mantras are worn on the body. Gayley speculates that these sensory objects can function in such soteriological ways due to being invested with charismatic power in the form of blessings from realized teachers.³⁹³ We can also think of this in the historical consideration of mantras as sounds that contain the power and efficacy of transcendent reality.³⁹⁴ This imagined power, like that of realized masters, can infuse the aural, visual, and tactile presentations of mantra and enable many forms of sound to be soteriologically effective. And though Gayley theorizes that the interchange between sensory modalities is often not meaningful in later and contemporary Tibetan religious cultures,³⁹⁵ we find that a greater concern for the specificities of the sensory modes and objects in these contemplative practices of the earlier Tibetan Renaissance, especially the Great Perfection, where the object of one's contemplative focus can radically alter the course of their liberation.

The kind of affective change to which these soteriological pathways and transformations aim can also be considered through the idea of affective atmospheres. These atmospheres create new senses of space-time, overflow with expressed world containing their own imagined senses of rationality, and dissolve divisions of subject and object, forming new subjectivities and ways of experiencing the world.³⁹⁶ When

³⁹³ Gayley, "Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism," 465.

³⁹⁴ Padoux, *Tantric Mantras*, 4-5.

³⁹⁵ Gayley, "Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism," 492-495.

³⁹⁶ Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres."

liberation is the desired goal, such atmospheres can be designed using sensory modalities that are infused with mundane and transcendent imaginations, generating spaces where affects of awakening can come into being. Gentry provides an example of a visualized atmosphere of the pure land of Amitābha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, who is often turned to in Mahāyāna Buddhism for his salvific capacity. This virtual visual space is infused with a variety of imaginations of this buddha's compassion and aspiration to liberate living beings. It is through active attunement to this atmosphere via visual, oral, and somatic practices, through accepting the gestalt of sensorially manifested imagination in embodied and sensory modes of contemplation, that the affective feeling of salvation is attained. Thus, we can consider that when sensory spaces encoded with soteriological imaginations are inhabited by individuals knowledgeable of those imaginations, the affective intensities produced therein can produce new states of subjectivity, whereby confused beings can become awakened buddhas.

The *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* share soteriological goals of tantric Buddhism, though the pathways to it diverge significantly. In this section, I argue that it is through listening to audible sounds, exploring multi-sensorial realms, delving into the physical body, and playing with the boundaries between internal and external, that these texts approach sound in diverse ways to produce a variety of soteriological results. In doing so, they take up the background orientations of sonic ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies found in their mundane and transcendent imaginations and mobilize them in their contemplations to enable acoustic awakening.

6.3.1 Audible Sound

Audible sound is the primary pathway for sonic soteriology in these texts. The *Secret*

Matrix uses recitation while the *Unimpeded Sound* uses a mixture of syllabic expression and listening. Recitation in the *Secret Matrix* finds aural language as the medium of its inquiry. Language takes two forms here: communication and identification. The mundane beings verbally communicate with each other to establish sexual pairings.

Communication thus serves as a support for the productive emotion of sexual desire.

Mantric particles are verbally identified according to their transcendent correspondences in recitations. Practitioners then verbally communicate to transcendent beings, calling for them to descend into the visualized forms the practitioners have taken. Once the mundane and transcendent beings are united, oral recitation is used as reflective self-identification. Practitioners declare aloud that they are transcendent and possess the attributes of awakening. These identifying phrases substantiate the theoretical and visualized claims, acoustically cementing their own awakening.

The *Unimpeded Sound*, in contrast, veers away from the expression of sound as linguistic to achieve its soteriological goals. In both the recitation and listening practices, audible sound is a pathway for attunement, like striking a tuning fork, and for the transmission of energy, like a radio broadcast. These two modes of audible sound and aural attention in the *Unimpeded Sound* transition between active modes of engagement and the self-emergence of transcendent realities. Reciting linguistic sounds and numbers beyond the limits of meaning starts as a process of exertion, diligently practiced for months. Eventually, these experiences of the mundane fabrications of the world dissolve and transcendent physical, aural, and multi-sensorial experiences self-emerge. Audible sounds thus become a primary way that transcendent experiences emerge. The practice of listening to the elements unfolds into the cries of living beings in the six realms, the

voices of a host of specialized Buddhist features, and the calls of the five sources of sound as Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapīṅka bird, and the five buddha families are heard within a self-emergent and transcendent soundscape. It is the emergence of these sounds that signals the arrival of transcendent states.

6.3.2 Multisensory

Soteriological contemplative practices of sound for these texts, though, are not always audible. The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* combine sound with vision, smell, taste, and touch to inquire after sounds, finding that the larger sensory sphere has implications for contemplation on sound. While the *Unimpeded Sound* is expansive in its sensory inquiries, the *Secret Matrix* focuses mainly on a visual-aural world. We have witnessed this sensory duality for the *Secret Matrix* play out in their sonic imaginations, in which there was a tension between the sounds of the letters and their visual forms. Some descriptions would imply the greater importance of the glyphs of the Sanskrit alphabet while others would specifically demonstrate that vibrational qualities of their sounds. In the contemplative practices of *Secret Matrix*, we find this to be a productive tension. The contemplative space for the *Secret Matrix* is the visualized maṇḍala. This process begins in chapter six of the *Secret Matrix* where the visual landscape of the maṇḍala is described. The visual forms of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are arrayed across the maṇḍala. The section further describes how visualized light emanates from the letters and returns, transforming them into the visual forms of the *Secret Matrix* is transcendent pantheon.

The mantric particles that emerge in its seventh chapter on mantra are a visual-aural component of that visualized space. The sonic particles are recited along with their

corresponding mantras which activates these visualized letters and transforms them into the visual forms of the deities. These sonically arisen visual deities are then stabilized via the three letters *Om*, *Ā*, and *Hung*, sonically and visually entering their heads, throats, and hearts. This process is often correlated with three colors of white, red, and blue, those that do not appear in this text. The identification mantras produce new visual aspects to the contemplation, such as crowns of the five primary buddhas and the five personified awakened attributes to appear in five locations in the tantric body. Visualized mantric letters that correspond with the five awakened attributes mark these new visual forms. Finally, it is through these verbal expressions that dissolution is triggered. But instead of dissolving into emptiness, something that is not specifically visualized, it describes dissolution into blazing colorful lights.

The *Unimpeded Sound* incorporates the visual medium within its soteriologically focused sonic practices, but also presents a rich diversity of sensory sonic engagement. At times, the correlations are limited. For example, the sensory contemplative practices contained within Viṣṇu's sounds do not deal with the aural domain, with the obvious exception of the practice on sound itself. These sensory practices explore vision, olfaction, gustation and touch through the material production of intense sensory objects. However, these are all contained within the rubric of sound. It is the sound of these enumerations that the text argues such divisions between the five senses have been created. It is similarly through attention to the sounds of numbers that such divisions can be dismantled. Likewise, descriptions of sensory minutiae found in discussions of the teacher's voice interrelate the senses and their objects to imagine sixty sensory capacities. While only a few of these directly correspond to sound, such as aural olfaction, the

clarification of these many sensory capacities and their eventual purification is enacted via the sonorities of the Buddha.

We also find direct connections between aural listening, sonic recitation, and multi-sensorial experiences. Recitations of Brahmā's sound in the aggregate of physical form cause transcendent visual experiences to self-emerge in ways that are highly reminiscent of the visionary experiences of the *Direct Crossing* practice of the Great Perfection. Another major type of experience generated through listening and reciting sounds is tactile. Practitioners' bodies begin to tremble, their skin crawls, their joints ache, they feel like they're floating, and their bodies are suffused with feelings of bliss. These multi-sensory experiences are triggered by sonic contemplations and lead to the profound forms of awakening offered in this text. Thus, practices of sound affect the understandings and transformations of all the senses which in turn impact the soteriological processes and experiences of acoustic awakening in the *Unimpeded Sound*.

6.3.3 *The Body*

In addition to the sensory locales of sound in these contemplative practices, we find that the body itself is a site for sonic soteriology. The *Secret Matrix* tantra revolves around sexual bodies coming together, the interiors of which are mapped with sonic maṇḍalas. The *Unimpeded Sound* transforms bodies through attention to sonic physiologies within tantric bodies and changes in physicality beginning with the tactile experiences witnessed above. Those lead to major elemental transformations and finally towards realization considered in the forms of awakened bodies.

In its imaginations, the *Secret Matrix* showed that the body was filled with the sounds of the alphabet. In its contemplations, the body houses the maṇḍala, and mantric particles

emit from the body. Physical bodies come together in sexual union to initiate the practice; their physical feelings of desire evoked by verbal communication. Even when these consort practices are merely visualized, one's own physical body takes on the sexual energy and feelings of the practice and remains the source of the sounds that emit into the maṇḍala. The interior component of physical sexual union is the coming together of the sexual organs of the male and female partners and the maṇḍala is visualized both in this location and with this material support. Each mantric particle emerges from the male sperm into the vaginal space of the female consort. These particles then transform into transcendent beings also in sexual union. In this way, we find that the physical experience and visualized metaphor of sexual intercourse is a central medium through which the *Secret Matrix* contemplatively explores soteriological pathways of sound.

Merging with these transcendent deities this also happens within the site of the body. Invited wisdom beings descend into the visualized physical forms in sexual union that have been thus created. Mantras that declare oneself awakened cause the primary buddhas to manifest onto one's head and the embodiments of the five awakened attributes to appear in five specialized places within the tantric body – the crown of the head, the throat, the heart, the navel, and the secret place of sexual generation. As we have seen above, mantric sounds find purchase even within those bodies as each is marked with a different particle relating to that physical location, such as *Om*, *Ā*, and *Hung* used previously in the three uppermost locations to stabilize their visual embodiments. Thus, bodies prove to be a way for the sounds of the *Secret Matrix* to contemplatively model the experiential embodiment of its transcendent imaginations.

The *Unimpeded Sound* maps out its own form of the tantric body in terms of sonic

physiology. In their imaginations, we have heard how the body is suffused with sounds and the way they imagine the five wheels of normative tantric physiology within the physical forms of beings. Their contemplations take up this imagination and activate sounds of the letters of the alphabet organized around these five wheels and throughout the channels via processes of visualization, recitation, and body percussion in their practices which physically reattune to the natural melodies of the kalapingka bird.

However, the body does not need to be the focus of these contemplations for it to be affected by sound. In *Listening to the Elements*, we find a series of physical transformations that begin with the tactile experiences described above. These unfold into total reconfigurations of one's physical form. This transpires primarily through changes in the ways the body responds to the elements, as well as a set of six superpowers which include superspeed and the increase and decrease in the size of one's body. The elemental transformations completely change the relationship between the body and the exterior elements, such that the elements can no longer harm or obstruct one's physical form. Listening to the sound of water enables one to swim without drowning. Listening to the sound of earth rearranges one's molecules such that one can walk through stone. Via the sound of fire, one's temperature increases to the point they can burn others with their touch and the harmful organisms living within them disintegrate in the heat. Finally, attuning to the sound of wind prevents one from being scattered by its gusts and enables their bodies to fly in the sky.

These physical transformations culminate in the metaphor of the awakened bodies. At times, this has physical ramifications. The preceding physiological effects were considered qualities of the awakened body of emanation. Other times though, the

metaphor of awakened body allows practitioners to consider their physical embodiments in new transcendent ways. The imaginations of a luminous enjoyment body and the empty reality body are mobilized at the end of the listening contemplations to the elements, and one takes on their qualities presented in the *Unimpeded Sound's* transcendent imagination. Thus, mundane and material bodies give way to transcendent forms of embodiment through listening to the sounds of the environment.

6.3.4 Interiority and Exteriority

Finally, differences between soteriologies focused inwards on beings and outwards on environments affect the ways sound is used and acts within these contemplations. Here, we find a sharp distinction between the *Secret Matrix* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. While each text attends to both sides of this divide, the *Secret Matrix* is highly concerned with the interior world for its contemplations. Conversely, the *Unimpeded Sound* seems fascinated by our external material and sensory environments. This discrepancy impacts the ways these traditions interact with sound, either auralized or material, as a soteriological tool. Recitation, though, acts as a bridge between interior soundings and exterior sound and finds purchase in both traditions' pathways to liberation.

The *Secret Matrix* locates its sonic contemplations within the interiors of sexual bodies as discussed above. These interior spaces can only be visualized and auralized, though tactile sensations can offer material supports. The *Secret Matrix* must therefore provide complex instructions and transformations of visualization and auralization in such interior spaces. Sounds enter visualized forms of deities in this interior maṇḍala and likewise the wisdom beings enter into oneself as the visualized forms of the maṇḍala. Finally, the identifying mantric phrases bring the five personified awakened attributes

with their own mantric particles into the interior spaces of the tantric body. These sonic transformations all happen within the interior of the body.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead looks outward. Most of its contemplations feature material components, such as the rich sensual objects of Viṣṇu's sensory contemplations, the external voice of the teacher, material manipulations of the elements in the temporal reckonings of the six types of beings, and of course, the primary contemplations on the exterior sounds of the elements. These elemental contemplations especially care about material environments. They prescribe natural settings in which elemental sounds flourish, and in which one interacts with the material world. Listening to the sound of water is not simply about hearing an isolated sound. The contemplative practice places one on the grassy banks of a river in a downward sloping valley, where the spray of the water can hit practitioners' bodies. Likewise, external winds pummel the body for months at a time, wearing them down until transcendent experiences begin to emerge. Privileging the exterior environment and material world as a medium for sonic practice thus has implications for the ways that living beings relate to sound. It takes beings outside of themselves and attunes them to the spontaneity, constant change, viscerally felt dimensions of natural and material sounds. It takes the perceived division between a subjective experience and objective materiality and brings them together, inviting practitioners to become lost in the co-emergence of exterior worlds and their individual experiences of them.

In the soteriologically driven contemplations of both texts, the divisions of interior and exterior, subject and object, are dissolved through sound. This unfolds differently in each system based on these two orientations. However, recitation serves as a connector

between the exterior environment and the interiority of beings and proliferates both traditions. The *Secret Matrix* described verbal communication as the process of connecting the interior and exterior worlds. It then employed verbalized recitations mantric particles and phrases to draw exterior transcendent beings inward to merge with oneself. Likewise, in the *Unimpeded Sound*, we are invited to alter the aesthetics of our voice to align with the sixty melodies of the kalapingka bird in order to communicate in transcendent ways. The ways we talk about and number the world are also targeted as sites of mundane straying. These confused verbal processes of communication and identification are disintegrated through adjusting our relationship to spoken linguistic sounds and numbers. Speech thus functions to move between the exterior and interior aspects of our subject-object experience, bridging the two and serving as a medium for their ultimate collapse and transcendence.

Conclusion to Part Three

Reciting mantras, auralizing syllables, and listening to sounds of the world mobilize the sonic imaginations of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. Through distinctive complexes of contemplative practice, these texts bring their imaginations of the environmental and individual dimensions of the mundane and transcendent worlds to life. The theories of sound imagined in these texts details the ways that sound confuses and awakens, generates constructions of the world according to four quadrants of meaning, and offers reflections on a variety of sonic mediums for inquiry that encourage the embodiment of sonic imaginations. These imaginations are not simply demonstrated through sonic contemplation, though. In addition, they are traversed through and transformed. These practices strip sounds of referential mundane meanings and replace them with transcendent ones. They dissolve the divisions between subjective beings and objective environments. And they use diverse pathways of sound, the senses, the body, and material environments in divergent ways to evoke soteriological affective change.

The *Secret Matrix* presents a contemplative structure that pushes mundane practitioners to become transcendent beings through effortful processes of sexuality, visualization, and recitation. It takes the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet which have been carefully encoded with mundane and transcendent imaginations of the world and the beings within and arrays those letters across a maṇḍala in a visualized and auralized space. These letters are organized into consort pairs and transform into the visual forms of the deities of the *Secret Matrix*'s transcendent pantheon to which they correspond. The practice of mantra recitation enacts these transformations, using letters of the Sanskrit alphabet that have been carefully replaced by mantric particles, retaining the imaginations encoded within each individual sound. These mantric particles enter the vaginal space of

the female consort supported by the material component of the male consort's sperm and are sonically activated by the recitation of their corresponding mantras. These transform into awakened consort pairs which act to systematically dismantle the conceptual aspects of the mundane world produced by linguistic sound, each sound targeting the concept to which they corresponded in the letter index. Once the maṇḍala is full of such sonically charged beings, four special sounds are spoken to invite, exhort, and merge with the true wisdom beings of the transcendent pantheon. Verbal declarations of identification fill one with divine pride and blessings of the five awakened attributes, which are embodied in five new sonically marked forms that array themselves throughout the tantric body. Finally, through the expression of these many sounds, one dissolves into blazing light.

In contrast to the logic of linear progression presented in the *Secret Matrix*, the contemplations of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra demonstrate a breadth of activity and customization. Meaningful and nonsensical linguistic syllables are recited to the limits of understanding, breaking down the reifications of the five psycho-physical aggregates and their corresponding emotional afflictions. Enumerations that are expressed to categorize the world are investigated each in their own terms and sounds of numbers are recited to the point of semantic satiation, ultimately leading to the dissolution of numerical categories. The aesthetics of their bodies, verbal intonations, and mind are re-adjusted to align with transcendent melodies. And merely hearing the voice of the Buddha becomes a path to transcendent sensory understandings of the world. Finally, listening to the sound of the elements in our environment situates practitioners within a material world. Combining environmental sounds with subjective imaginations and experiences produces

atmospheres that transform our bodies and aural experiences, ultimately leading to acoustic forms of awakening.

Each text approaches three fundamental discourses of contemplative epistemology, cosmology, and soteriology in their own ways. The problem of referential meaning leading to mundane existence is overcome with two different solutions. The *Secret Matrix* replaces mundane references with transcendent ones, demonstrating that reference itself was never the problem. It was only the ways that mundane references brought about the unwarranted substantiation of discreet phenomena, such as the manifold processes of individuals and the solidity of the material world. Newly referenced transcendent imaginations, though, allow for sound awaken our experience to the truth of reality. Alternatively, linguistics sounds are stripped of meaning and the *Unimpeded Sound*. It is at the very limits of sensibility, where semantic understanding overflows past the point of satiation, that one is able to experientially move beyond the problems imposed by referential language and numbers. However, the *Unimpeded Sound* also seeks to encode its sounds with transcendent reference points. The sounds of the elements disclose transcendent experiences of the five sources of sound, which lead to acoustically awakening in the three buddha bodies.

Further, when sound is expressed in each of these traditions, it acts to produce new experiences, transforming participants' epistemological perception. In the *Secret Matrix*, one purposefully and effortfully engages with sexual partners, visualizations, mundane misconceptions, transcendent beings, and their own sense of self. By reciting mantric particles and phrases, sexual desire is ignited, visualized spaces and beings transform, the concepts of the world breakdown, buddhas are invited to merge with oneself, and one is

able to realize that they themselves are awakened.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead finds the activities of sound naturally bring about self-emergent experiences. While it uses effortful practices, such as recitation or the manipulation of material objects, the mechanism of transformation does not appear to be based on activation or communication. Rather, we find a process of attunement to the transcendent modes of sounds that permeate our world. By reconfiguring our physical, verbal, and mental aesthetic sensibilities, we come into alignment with transcendent melodies. By opening our senses to the voice of the teacher, our sensory understanding and capacity is transformed. And by simply listening to sounds of the material world, transcendent voices that cry out the sound of reality self-emerge into our experience. Thus, sounds now encoded with transcendent meaning act through effort and easeful attunement to radically alter and awaken our experience.

Knowing through sound in these new ways results in collapsing and re-substantiating the cosmologies of the mundane and transcendent worlds. Both texts imagine a mundane world according to traditional Buddhist ideologies, categorized into external environments and the beings therein. These categories of our conceptual world, such as the five psycho-physical aggregates and the five elements, our sensory perception and their sensory objects, are brought together to dissolve the boundaries of subjective experience and objective worlds. These connections were theorized in the sonic imaginations for both texts but are brought to life in their contemplations.

The *Secret Matrix* accomplishes these connections through the metaphor and practice of sexual union, in which concepts of subjective experience are paired with ideas about objective environments. When the deities of the transcendent pantheon who correspond

to these mundane concepts unite, their emanations further act to divest these concepts of their power over beings. The *Unimpeded Sound* instead casts these connections as elemental resonances between the bodies of beings and their environments. When one listens to their body's resonant elemental sound, environments and experiences blend such that the mundane barriers keeping us in delusion dissolve and transcendent experiences emerge. Thus, for both texts, the breakdown of the subject-object division leads to experience of transcendence, following traditional Buddhist views that find such duality to be a central problem with mundane existence. It is only when the sexual partners pair that one can transform it into an awakened being. Likewise, it is only in the aural attunement of elemental bodies and sonic environments that the transcendent sounds of awakening self-emerge.

Throughout all these explorations, both texts pay attention to the pathways through which sound acts to awaken. These soteriological pathways have broad implications in the ways practitioners of these two texts' contemplations engage with sounds and in the kinds of experiences that manifest from them. The recitation of audible sounds is central to the *Secret Matrix*. It allows practitioners to communicate with each other and with transcendent deities and to verbally identify with and actualize their new awakened paradigm. This is an active process that involves the coming together of multiple beings and it privileges verbal expression when dealing with both others and oneself. Some recitation is used in the *Unimpeded Sound*, though for different processes of semantics satiation and attunement to patterns of intonation. However, a more passive form of listening to audible sounds permeates this text. Merely paying attention to our aural experience of the material world discloses the new transcendent realities imagined by the

Unimpeded Sound.

The *Secret Matrix* further blends sound and visual form to enact its soteriological program. It takes up the traditional tantric connection between visualizations and the sounds of mantras. The visual forms of the letters of the alphabet and of mantric particles are both visualized and auralized. They interact with oneself and the world in both sensory modalities, activating and stabilizing visualized transcendent embodiments through letters, while sending out visual emanations to undo the problems of the mundane world previously signified by the alphabet. The *Unimpeded Sound* instead innovates by playing with a rich diversity of sensory matter instead. It features contemplations on each of the five senses in which one manipulates intense sensory objects to provoke experience. Further, by reciting and listening to sound, visionary experiences self-emerge and tactile sensations alight in the body.

The body itself also becomes a pathway for soteriology through sound. These practices take up contemplative imaginations around the tantric body from the broader tantric tradition and use them to enact their own sonic imaginations through contemplative inquiry. The sexual body is the location of the transcendent maṇḍala wherein sounds emanate and transform into the transcendent pantheon of the *Secret Matrix*. The metaphor of sexual pairing between concepts of subject and object becomes embodied in sexual yoga and the material sperm entering the vaginal space sonically manifests into a divine palace and transcendent beings. Turning away from this Mahāyoga aesthetics of sexuality, the *Unimpeded Sound* considers the body according to its own aesthetics of nature and spontaneity. The body is made from the elements of the natural world and must be used according to its elemental constitution. This attunement

radically and spontaneously changes the body, moving one from sensations of pain to bliss. Last, resonating with the frequencies of awakening transmitted to via the sounds of the elements causes one to arise in the form of the three awakened bodies.

Finally, within all these soteriological pathways, the *Secret Matrix* in the *Unimpeded Sound* look inward and outward in their divergent approaches. The *Secret Matrix* focuses on the interiority of the body in its contemplations, locating the maṇḍala in the vaginal womb, bringing the wisdom being down into one's visualized form, and placing the five primary buddhas with their five awakened attributes across and within one's individual body. It is within oneself that acoustic awakening can be conceived and realized.

Conversely, the *Unimpeded Sound* looks to the exterior world of the natural environments that surround us. Aural attention to the outer world changes our experience of it and likewise the experience of ourselves. It revels in a rich array of sensory objects and materials, privileging such experiences of the external over visualized experiences within ourselves. Even within contemplation on the tantric body, the focus remains on our exterior physical bodies and the sounds we vocalize out into the world. This is most poignantly witnessed in prescriptions for natural environmental settings in which one listens to the sounds of the external elements that rush and roar and them. For the *Unimpeded Sound*, acoustic awakening is found outside ourselves, not within.

In these ways, the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras bring the transcendent imaginations of both texts to life and move through them, such that beings attain awakening through sound. Whether they focus on the interior or exterior, we find them both creating atmospheres in which the sounds of environments come together with one's sensory perception and experience informed by sonic imagination. These atmospheres are

nebulous states in which the boundaries between self and other become dissolved – where the transcendence of our mundane condition becomes possible. Thus, these texts are able to affect beings, moving them from emotional affliction, confusion, and conceptualization of the mundane world towards transcendent states of bliss, transformation, and awakened embodiments. These contemplations thus represent the joining of the mundane and transcendent sonic imaginations for both texts as well as their application in the experience of practitioners. While these contemplations are highly divergent in their methodology, approach, and theoretical models, we find them both attending to these transformative processes central to the Buddhist program through sound.

Conclusion

Atmosphere seems to express something vague. Something, an ill-defined indefinite something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration. Something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable. – Ben Anderson³⁹⁷

7.1 The Texts

In this dissertation, we have traced the sonic imaginative and contemplative programs of both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. Both find sound to be a core component of their larger programs of awakening, used as both a resource for imagining Buddhist visions of the mundane world and transcendence, and a sensory object on which to contemplate. However, these traditions produce highly divergent sonic paths to acoustic awakening.

7.1.1 The *Secret Matrix*

The *Secret Matrix* Tantra, and its Mahāyoga commentary, the *Sun's Quintessence*, base their imaginations on the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Organized according to traditional Sanskrit letter families, they theorize that the mundane world and the transcendent pantheon map onto these foundational sounds of language. Language is a problem for the *Secret Matrix*, described as the cause for the confusion of the mundane world. It draws upon Buddhist philosophies of language to argue that the references substantiated by language are mere illusions. With this in mind, the *Secret Matrix* presents an index to delineate the connections between each of the forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and each one of forty-two conceptual components that together comprise the mundane world.

³⁹⁷ Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 78.

These concepts include the five psycho-physical aggregates, the five elements of the material world, the five sense perceptions, their five sensory objects, and their corresponding five sensory organs, as well as four times, four erroneous philosophical views, and the six emotionally charged types of living beings. Each of these groups are organized according to their letter family and are divided into mundane phenomena of our external environments, such as the elements and sensory objects, and the mundane phenomena that make up ourselves, including our psycho-physical aggregates and sensory perceptions. These letters are further arrayed across our mundane bodies, both following articulation patterns from Sanskrit linguistic theory and mapping out new ways that the sounds of the alphabet suffuse our physical form.

However, sound does not only delude us into this mundane existence. Instead, the *Secret Matrix* shows how the sonic reverberations of the letters of the alphabet across our world violently shakes the phenomena of the mundane world, disrupting normal patterns of linguistic meaning. Sound is then reinfused with imaginations of transcendence. The forty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet that once caused confusion now give rise to forty-two awakened beings of the transcendent pantheon. These beings are likewise organized according to Sanskrit letter families, such that the five primary male buddhas of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala take the place of five primary concepts of mundane existence, mainly the five psycho-physical aggregates that makeup ourselves. These five male buddhas are paired with their female consorts who replace the mundane concepts of the material elements in a paired letter family.

These consort pairs of letter families continue, expanding outwards through the maṇḍala, and find matching consort pairs of inner and outer bodhisattvas as well as pairs

of wrathful gatekeepers. These awakened beings are imagined according to their three awakened bodies and five awakened attributes, all of which are suffused with sonic meaning. This transcendent pantheon, and indeed all phenomena of the mundane world as well, arise from the foundation of reality, which is signified by the letter *A*, a mystical letter theorized across Indian religious traditions. For the *Secret Matrix*, this letter gives rise to all forty-two sounds, all forty-two concepts of the mundane world, and all forty-two transcendent beings of the pantheon. It itself appears in the form of Samantabhadrī, the female awakened embodiment of this generative space of reality.

These imaginations are taken up in the *Secret Matrix*'s contemplative program of mantra recitation, visualization, auralization, and sexual union. The commentary carefully recasts each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet as mantric particles through visual and semantic processes. Within consort practices of sexual union, the desire for which is ignited by verbal communication, these mantric particles enter the vaginal womb of the female consorts along with their material supports of the male consort's sperm. These visualized and auralized particles are activated by the recitation of their corresponding mantras, thus transforming into forms of transcendent beings which take their places in the maṇḍala. These visualized forms are stabilized via three auralized letters which correspond to the three awakened attributes of body, speech, and mind.

Once embodied, these consort pairs act to dismantle all forty-two concepts of the mundane world, each according to their correspondence in the letter-index. These forms are truly awakened with four specialized sounds that invoke and the wisdom beings of the transcendent pantheon, summoning them to inseparably merge with oneself in the form of the maṇḍala deities. Verbal mantric expressions self-affirm one's identification with

the deities of the transcendent pantheon and cause awakened beings of the five buddha families and five awakened attributes to array across one's body. Finally, these sonic expressions culminate into a dissolution of all mundane and transcendent phenomena into visions of blazing light.

7.1.2 The *Unimpeded Sound*

The *Unimpeded Sound*, and its commentary the *Blazing & Illuminating Lamp*, present a more diverse sets of imaginations and contemplations around sound. Five sources of sound are identified and located within the living beings and environments of the mundane world. These sounds are named according to their source: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, the sounds of the elements, and the teacher's voice. Each presides over a different type of sound that has come into our world, such as linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, environmental, and doctrinal sound.

Misunderstandings of these sounds substantiate the mundane world. Brahmā's letters of the alphabet linguistically conceptualize ourselves, reifying the five psycho-physical aggregates and leading to emotional affliction. Viṣṇu's numbers compartmentalize the phenomena of the mundane world into sets of enumerations, such as divisions between material environments and ourselves, the four seasons broken down into elemental times, the five senses, the six types of living beings, and three states of mind. The melodies of the legendary kalapingka bird suffuse our physical bodies, verbal intonations, and cognitive modes of attention, though our mundane senses of aesthetics are not attuned to them. The sounds of the elements give rise to our material forms and their temperature differentials cause us to stray into desire, ignorance, and anger. And our sensory capacities are found lacking until we hear the teacher's voice.

But like in the *Secret Matrix*, these sounds that caused our delusion can also reveal reality. Introductory narratives demonstrate how Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the kalapingka bird, beings previously caught within the confusion of mundane existence, become a part of the transcendent pantheon through hearing and speaking the words of the *Unimpeded Sound*. Their linguistic, numerical, and aesthetic sounds are recast as tools of awakening. Thus, the commentary promises that attention to Brahmā's letters will dissolve the grasping of the five psycho-physical aggregates and remove the turmoil of their corresponding emotional afflictions.

Working with the individual categories delineated by Viṣṇu's numbers transcends the limits of each. Attuning to the melodic reverberations of the kalapingka's song in our bodies, voices, and minds promises the purification of these three dimensions of ourselves. The teacher's voice and the sounds of the elements are imagined as innately pure, though misheard. Authentically hearing the sound of the teacher's voice moves us past linguistic reference and purifies our sensory capacities. Finally, the sounds of the elements are theorized to transmit the qualities of the three awakened bodies of a buddha.

Sonic contemplative practice is likewise presented in a sprawling array that privileges individualization and customization. Fixed orders are rarely prescribed other than prioritizations of one's individual context, often described according to systems of elemental physiology and temporal calculations. Instead, one chooses between the many contemplative programs. The recitation of words corresponding to the mundane aggregates past their limits of semantics satiation, or even starting with nonsense words, unravels the referential reification of language and frees us from their afflictive bonds. These recitations further give rise to a variety of sensory experiences and physical

transformations, culminating in self-emergent aural experiences of the sounds of the elements to which one's physical constitution corresponds.

Likewise, reciting numbers beyond their limits of meaning strips them of any referential value. However, as each category of enumeration is approached on its own terms, we are presented with a wealth of sensory practices that deeply care about the material and elemental worlds. The commentary describes, in detail, recipes for perfumes and foods, as well as instructions on how to build your own musical instruments. Contemplatively sensing into such rich materials super charges our senses, transcending their limits. Living beings are correlated with elemental times of the year and day, calculations which one uses to make elemental material preparations to appease them, thus gaining specific transcendent abilities.

Tapping into the melodic sounds of the kalapingka bird, suffusing our bodies and its channels, with visualization, recitation, and body percussion, realigns our physical forms to their naturally aesthetic sonorities. Singing with a series of vocal intonation patterns empowers our speech. And reattuning our mental sense of aesthetics to the natural rise and fall of our breath, the elemental sounds of our natural environments, and new orientations towards aesthetic language production with the letters of the alphabet purifies our minds. Simply listening to the sound of the teacher's voice produces sensory experiences that go beyond our normal sensory limitations.

Finally, listening to the sounds of the elements places practitioners in natural environments such as the top of a mountain or next to a raging river. In these material spaces, a practitioner intently listens to the sounds of the element that corresponds with their own body's elemental constitution. For months at a time, these adepts will intensely

listen to the rush of the river, the clinking of stones, the roar of a bonfire, and the exhausting din of pummeling wind. These elemental sounds unfold into expansive soundscapes that reveal the suffering cries of beings in the six realms of mundane existence and feature the four other transcendence sources of sound: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, and to the melodious tones of Sky-Dancer goddesses who represent the five families of the Buddha teacher. Throughout all these aural experiences, one's physical body shakes, aches, and fills with bliss, transforming them into forms that surpass the dangers and limits of the elements. Ultimately, their bodies take on the three awakened dimensions promised within the sonic imagination of transcendence, thus enacting acoustic awakening.

7.2 Imagination and Contemplation

Both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras thus accomplish acoustic awakening with a combination of sonic imaginations and sonic contemplations. The mundane world and transcendence from it are imagined using soundscapes such as the letters of the alphabet and the sounds of the elements. These imaginations are then mobilized within contemplative practices that move practitioners from the mundane to the transcendent, producing experientially embodied realizations of such awakening. Practitioners who thus imagine the mundane world and transcendence in these sonic ways are placed in virtual or material environments, creating atmospheres in which sensory experience can meet Buddhist imaginations, breaking down divisions between subject and object, and transforming beings.

I have argued that each dimension of imagination and contemplation is supported by, and explored through, four philosophical discourse with which the texts are concerned:

ontology, epistemology, cosmology, and soteriology. Reflections on each of these four discourses tracked throughout this dissertation will be considered here, as well as the ways they contribute to the affective atmospheres of these texts.

7.2.1 Four Discourses of Sound

7.2.1.1 *Ontology*

Considerations on sound as an ontological touchstone for both traditions' imaginations of the mundane and the transcendent inform their understandings of the ways sound can be used to complete their philosophical and contemplative programs. We find that the organizational systems, traditional usages, and capacities of sound set the horizons within which these texts can operate, as well as offer new resources for their theorizations and meditations.

For the *Secret Matrix*, the primary limiting and constructive feature of sound is the organization of the Sanskrit alphabet. The five letter families of the alphabet and its other numbered groupings provided a strict yet fluid framework for both its mundane and transcendent imaginations. Groups of mundane concepts and transcendent deities must equal five in order to correctly map onto the alphabet. Further, using the alphabetical letter pairings of the retroflex and dental *Ṭa* and *Ta* families provides a model for the *Secret Matrix* to consider both the pairings of the dualistic subject-object oriented mundane world and the consort pairings of its transcendent maṇḍala. However, this organization can be played with as well. The *Secret Matrix* uses various systems of prioritization to group letter families and their correspondences. In addition, it breaks apart letter families so that their nasal letters can take up the four posts as wrathful gatekeepers and pair with the four erroneous philosophical views, transcendentally embodied as the female wrathful gatekeepers.

The *Unimpeded Sound* instead uses a holistic array of sounds to consider the mundane world and transcendence. The nature, usage, and traditional Buddhist imaginations of these sounds deeply inform the ways it conceptualizes the mundane worlds, as well as the path to transcendence. Sounds of language are found to reify ourselves, and thus are theorized as the psycho-physical aggregates and afflictive emotions. Sounds of numbers are used to catalog of the world, and thus are reflected in the text with different numerical categorizations of mundane concepts. Our voices are imbued with melodic potential, but so are our material bodies which are filled with sounds, and minds which can receive the world according to aesthetic sensibilities. The voice of the buddha, which is traditionally theorized to contain sixty melodious qualities, is used to imagine the kinds of interrelated sensory capacities within us each of these qualities might impact. The sounds of our elemental environments allow the text to theorize the ways our material bodies might be connected to the external world.

7.2.1.2 Epistemology

Sounds epistemological capacities shape our perception and embodied experience of reality. In these texts, sound does things. It conceals reality, conceptualizing, reifying, and cataloging the appearances that manifest from the ground. It also reveals reality, shaking our conception of the mundane world to its core, pushing words past their limits of meaning, and encoding sounds with new transcendent references. It transforms our physical embodiments, the ways we speak, and our cognitive understandings of the world and reality. Though sound shares many of the same general capacities in both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras, the precise ways these expressive activities unfold in both texts is highly divergent.

The *Secret Matrix* finds normal referential meanings of language to be the primary problem of sound and a source of our straying in the mundane world. Indian Buddhist philosophical logic is augmented by individual correlations between the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and as their corresponding concepts of mundane world. These letters cement the many conceptual categories that comprise our mundane existence and divide it into subjects and objects, often considered a core delusion and cause of suffering. The *Unimpeded Sound* presents a more expansive theorization of sound's contribution to our confusion. Language is a part of the problem with sound, as it is found to reify our conception of selves as five psycho-physical aggregates that are emotionally tormented. In addition, numerical enumerations divide, catalog, and delimit our world. Misplaced senses of aesthetics cause problems in our physical bodies, our vocal intonations, and our practices of cognitive attention. Misunderstandings of our sonic environments lead to delusion of division between material environments and ourselves. And the lack of a teacher's voice to guide us keeps our sensory capacities from reaching their true potential.

However, the same sounds that concealed reality for both texts also reveal it. The letters of the alphabet that cause the conceptualizations of the mundane world for the *Secret Matrix* are also identified as sounds that overflow from the awakened body, speech, and mind of the buddhas, thus carrying their blessings and capacities. When these sounds wash over the world, they shake away all misunderstandings of mundane phenomena as substantial, revealing them to being mere names. Instead of merely referencing deluded appearances, sound can also point to foundational reality and the transcendent beings of the *Secret Matrix* pantheon, each of whom correspond to a

different letter of the Sanskrit alphabet. Thus, when the conceptual world generated by the alphabet is stripped away, one is left with sonically manifested transcendent reality. The *Unimpeded Sound* also seeks to place new transcendent references within sound, starting with the sounds of its own title which point to foundational characteristics of reality. Sound also has the expressive capacity to awaken beings and transmits the seeds of the three awakened bodies. All four embodied sources of sound in the world – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, the kalapingka bird, and the teacher – are described as awakening do to the sounds of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra and the sounds of the elements. Further, sounds from all five sources are shown to reveal reality and cause transcendent purification of our body, speech, and mind.

The sonic contemplations of both texts fill the gap between a sound as deluding and sound as revelatory. They take up imaginations of the mundane concepts that sound has reified and of sound's potential to awaken beings to a transcendent reality filled with new sonic references. The *Secret Matrix* moves sound into the domain of mantras. Mantric particles take on transcendent references and are transformed by spoken mantras, leading to the disintegration of the previous mundane referential confusion. Verbalized sound is also used to ignite the desire necessary for sexual yoga, invite transcendent beings to merge with oneself, and proclaim aloud one's transcendent identity. While new transcendent references are also part of the *Unimpeded Sound's* epistemological imagination, its contemplative practices seek to strip sound of their meaning through processes of semantic satiation and nonsense recitation. It instructs practitioners to attune to the elemental sound is that corresponds with their body's own constitution, allowing for the proper transmission of the three awakened bodies and insight into a host of

transcendence of aural, physical, and other-sensory experiences. In the end, both texts use sonic contemplation to lead to acoustic awakening, wherein the culmination of sounds expression dissolves into blazing a colored light for the *Secret Matrix* and builds into transcendent cacophonies for the *Unimpeded Sound*. Ultimately, transcendent knowing for both traditions is found in sensory ways.

7.2.1.3 Cosmology

The ways that reality manifests and organizes across the mundane and transcendent worlds is a central concern for the cosmological imaginations and contemplations of both texts. The world is charted according to an axis that divides phenomena into external environments and their internal living beings, as well as an axis that separates mundane existence from transcendence. These quadrants are not static or isolated, but rather are connected together via sound, allowing for transformations of one's dualistic experience and movements between our mundane perception of the world to transcendent reality.

This *Secret Matrix* uses the organization of the Sanskrit alphabet as a framework to construct its visions of both the mundane and transcendent worlds. Its mundane imagination presents concepts that form our understandings of our exterior environments, such as the five elements of the material world, the five types of sensory objects, and the four time periods, as well as our understandings of ourselves, including the five psycho-physical aggregates, the five sensory perceptions, and the five sense organs. These exterior and interior groups are paired via their letter families, such that our conceptualizations of our own existence are intimately connected to our external environments. The *Unimpeded Sound* charts its understanding of the mundane world's make-up according to the domains of its five sources of sound. Linguistic sound gives

rise to conceptions of ourselves, such as our five psycho-physical aggregates and five emotional afflictions. Numerical sounds give rise to the catalogs of enumerations, breaking our world up into categories such as the five senses and the six types of living beings. Our bodies, voices, and minds are mapped according to the kalapingka's melodies. The external environments of our material world are organized according to the sounds of the elements. And our sensory capacities are detailed to reflect the number of qualities of awakened speech.

The transcendent pantheon, with its embodiments and attributes, is also delineated according to sound. The *Secret Matrix* continues to use the Sanskrit alphabet as a letter index, matching groups of deities to letter families. These groups are joined in consort pairs, matching the pairings of mundane external environments and their internal living beings. These transcendent beings are fleshed out according to their three dimensions of awakened embodiment, explaining their sonic manifestation and capacity to act within the world. The *Unimpeded Sound's* pantheon proves more limited than the *Secret Matrix's*, though also more central to the function of sound in the world. It promotes three prominent figures, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and the kalapingka bird, to states of transcendence. It further explains that all teachers become transcendent on the basis of the sounds of the elements, and organizes them according to the five awakened attributes and their emergence in the past, present, or future. Both texts also show concern for transcendent environments, such as the divine and immeasurable palace of the *Secret Matrix* maṇḍala and the transcendent natural environments demonstrated by elemental sounds. However, they are more concerned with the foundational context in which such transcendence arises. The ground of reality is theorized in both texts according to sound.

The letter *A* signifies this foundational reality for the *Secret Matrix* tantra, while it is the natural sound of reality that reverberates in the *Unimpeded Sound*. Both of these sounds cause all phenomena of the mundane world and transcendence to manifest. They are used to show how an empty reality can dynamically appear. As the letter *A* manifests, and is inherent in, all other letters of the alphabet, so too does reality appear as phenomena. Likewise, the sonic materialities of the sounds of the elements originate from realities reverberations, and further give rise to the physical forms of beings, ultimately leading back to realization of such reality.

The sonic contemplations that mobilize these constructions of reality target the points of connection between external environments and internal beings. The dissolution of these boundaries then leads to experiences of transcendence. This *Secret Matrix* accomplishes this by carefully mapping their sonic imaginations onto mantric particles which are used in the visualizations and auralizations of their sexual yoga practices. The metaphor and felt experience of sexual union brings together the imaginations of the letter index that paired male and female transcendent beings along with their corresponding external and internal phenomena of the mundane world. In such coemergent union, the boundaries between external and internal dissolve, and in that state, one can truly become a transcendent being. The *Unimpeded Sound* likewise mobilizes imaginations of outer and inner, especially in the form of the external elemental sounds and the internal elemental constitutions. When one's body is united with one's environments, transcendent experiences begin to arise. These experiences transform our bodies such that conflict between humans and environments is overcome. We finally take on the three awakened bodies, completing our elevation from mundane

beings to transcendent ones.

7.2.1.4 Soteriology

Finally, sound is contemplatively mobilized as a soteriological instrument to move practitioners between the mundane and transcendent worlds. In this capacity, we find that it is presented both its audible forms and its combinations with other traditional media of Buddhist contemplative investigation, including the body, vision, aesthetics, and orientations to either internal and virtual worlds or external natural ones. These differing pathways affect the designs and experiences of soteriological contemplative practices within both traditions.

Audible sounds are recited in the *Secret Matrix* to verbally communicate with deities, acoustically activate mantric particles, and self-identify as the Buddha. While sounds are recited in the *Unimpeded Sound*, it is rather for the purpose of semantic satiation. The *Unimpeded Sound* focuses on listening to audible sounds to achieve transcendent states. It uses the movements of sound between exterior worlds and the perceptions of beings as a receptive mode of natural ease, aligning with Great Perfection contemplative values and unfolding into self-emerging transcendent auditory experiences not unlike the visionary experiences of the *Direct Crossing*.

In these practices, sound is also combined with other sensory mediums such as vision. The visual forms of the letters coincide with their audible sounds, and thus the contemplative practice of the *Secret Matrix* and features both visualizations and auralizations. Recitation and listening in the *Unimpeded Sound* gives rise to visionary and tactile experiences, while intense material sensory objects are manipulated on the path to transcend the numerical sounds of Viṣṇu. The sexual body is the key context for this

Secret Matrix. All its visualizations and auralizations happen in the vaginal space of the female consort and via the material support of the male sperm. The elemental body of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra provides a platform for individualization and bodies are variously transformed according to the specific sounds to which one contemplatively listens. Finally, the *Secret Matrix* aims to contemplate sound using interior controlled spaces, wherein auralized and visualized experiences can be deftly manipulated. In contrast, the *Unimpeded Sound* listens outward to natural and spontaneous sounds of the material world, letting their divergent and fluctuating sounds wash over them as transcendent experiences self-emerge.

7.2.2 Affective Atmospheres

In considering the contemplative and imaginative projects of both the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras as a whole, I would like to return to the idea of affective atmospheres. These texts present rich imaginations of sound, encoding particular soundscapes such as the alphabet, mantric particles, and the sounds of the elements with distinctive Buddhist systems of knowledge describing ourselves and our world. I argue that they are attempting to craft a hermeneutic filter through which sounds can be heard anew, overflowing with religious meaning and affect. Contemplative practices of these traditions intentionally target the soundscapes thus imagined, bringing together sensory environments and humans whose perceptions are filtered in these ways. The imaginative and discursive process of thinking through Buddhist knowledge with sonic mediums was not enough for these traditions. They instead decided to bring a practitioner, filled with such sonic imaginations, into sonic spaces that would amplify a felt sense of such discursive realities throughout their embodied experiences. Through the meeting of these

two sonic ‘bodies’ – sensory environments and Buddhist practitioners – new transcendent experiences could emerge, in which both the practitioners and the environments would change. Thus, we find the atmospheres at play to be larger than either of its component parts. Neither Buddhist imaginations nor sensory environments in themselves could produce such transcendent experiences. But their careful coemergence is considered by these texts to create atmospheres with their own expressions of affective intensities, space, and time which transcend distinctions between and subjects and objects.

We find in these texts that sound provides the background orientation³⁹⁸ for religious imaginative and contemplative approaches to affective production. The *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras establish ontological frameworks around the metaphor of sound, substantiating imaginative rationalities³⁹⁹ through which practitioners can interpret the world. The organization of sound according to the Sanskrit alphabet and its placement as mantric particles within the maṇḍala of the *Secret Matrix* presents a uniquely structured expressed world, containing imaginatively encoded meaning beyond its sensory appearance. Building on known experiences of sound, such as language, enumerations, melody, and natural environments, the *Unimpeded Sound* uses a holistic ontological framework of sound to attend to all of experience. This sets up their atmospheres to evoke transformative experiences across these diverse domains.

Dufrenne speaks of ‘expressed worlds’⁴⁰⁰ when considering the experiences produced by affective atmospheres,⁴⁰¹ wherein sensory objects express new affective intensities

³⁹⁸ Andiloro, “This Must Be the Place,” 209-212.

³⁹⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 235.

⁴⁰⁰ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. by Casey, E., Anderson, A. Domingo, W., Jacobson, L. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 183.

⁴⁰¹ Ben Anderson is taking Dufrenne’s work on the concept of atmosphere in aesthetics and applying it to

that alter the ways a listener perceives the world. Sonically evoked processes of knowing are also a concern for both texts. Under normal circumstances, both texts imagine that sound leads to confused perception. With these new interpretive filters, though, sound in both material and virtual worlds reveals transcendent realities. Thus, when the sounds of individual and environmental bodies emerge, practitioners are already prepared for sound's epistemologically transformative capacities. They are receptive to the kinds of affective changes produced by sound in this atmospheric meeting of sensory environments and perceiving subjects.

Practitioners of the *Secret Matrix* imaginatively know that mantric recitation can ignite desirous perceptions for a consort, activate auralizations and visualizations in order to dismantle conceptual grasping, call down transcendent beings to perceive and inseparably merge with, and identify themselves as the Buddha whereby their bodies become filled with awakened attributes. In the worlds of the *Unimpeded Sound*, practitioners likewise know that if their bodies are aligned with their environment, merely listening to the expression of its natural sounds will cause self-emergent transcendent experiences to overflow in their aural perception and bodies. These experiences fundamentally alter the way the practitioner perceives and engages with the world and reality. With these imaginations in mind, practitioners of both texts are thus approaching their contemplative soundscapes ready to take up the open and unfinished⁴⁰² expressions of sound into their perceptual understanding of the world.

The ambiguity between subject and object found in affective atmospheres⁴⁰³ helps us

his own notion of affective atmospheres. Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 79.

⁴⁰² Two qualities of affective atmospheres. See Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 79.

⁴⁰³ Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 77.

consider the ways these texts are experientially mobilizing the kinds of dissolution between a subject-object duality that is a central component of traditional Buddhist cosmological and contemplative models. Both texts are concerned in their imaginations with the distinction between the objects of external environments and the subjective beings who live within. These are mapped out to according to a variety of both traditional and novel Buddhist systems of knowledge, such as the five psycho-physical aggregates, the five elements, and the combination of sensory perception and objects. Both texts seek to dissolve these distinctions in their cosmological imaginations and contemplations.

The *Secret Matrix* accomplishes this through imaginatively connecting the letters, concepts, and transcendent deities of their letter index. On each of these three levels, we find the *Secret Matrix* weaves together the objective and subjective realms, reimagining them as transcendent beings intertwined in sexual union and as letters whose sounds and shapes are echoes of each other. These unions become embodied experiences in the sexual yogas, recitations, and visualizations of the *Secret Matrix*. These all mobilize their imaginations, bringing both human and virtual bodies encoded with these distinctions together. The resulting experiences are described as the emergence of transcendent subjectivities and the dissolution of phenomenal boundaries.

Likewise, the *Unimpeded Sound* imagines the material external world and sentient living beings both under the rubric of the elements. While they are perceived as separate, the sounds of the elements arisen from a sonic transcendent reality generate the elemental bodies of living beings. Due to this connective series of emergences, the *Unimpeded Sound* theorizes that listening to elemental sound can give way to forms of primordial knowing. Thus, its contemplative practices places beings of particular elemental

constitutions in the natural and material environments where the sounds of their respective elements are intense. The joining of these two elemental types of bodies with such imaginations at play overflows into transcendent experiences that both transform the aural environment and the physical and spiritual bodies of practitioners in specific ways which correspond to the elemental environments they meet.

In practice, the pathways of sound and hearing are perhaps particularly aligned with the spaces and practices of affective atmospheres. Brandon Labelle theorizes that sound has innate temporality, energetic animation, and capacities to overwhelm space and overflow beyond the borders of environments and human embodiment. It's productive ambiguity also grants flexibility and surprise in processes of meaning making. All these qualities help create atmospheres which have a "positive unfixity," allowing for transformations that free practitioners from the limits of mundane existence.⁴⁰⁴ Both traditions use this ambiguous and overwhelming nature of sound to create spaces and pathways for religious forms of liberation. Sound is taken up in its normative practices of communication, invitation, and self-identification, using these sonic pathways to bridge self and other and to transform ourselves into transcendent beings as the end goal of both traditions' soteriological models. In the *Secret Matrix*, these sonic events mark procedural time, ultimately leading to the emergence of distinct changes in affective conditions. Alternatively, listening is a practice in which one becomes lost in sounds that fill space. As natural sounds dynamically and spontaneously change over the course of the elemental listening practices of the *Unimpeded Sound*, practitioners find that these

⁴⁰⁴ LaBelle uses "ambience" as another way to consider the work being done by atmosphere. However, ambiances tend to focus on the exterior environments as opposed to the preceptory coming together of objects and subjects. See LaBelle "Sharing Architecture".

animated sounds overflow into them, overwhelming their aural sense with transcendent melodies and transforming their bodies with their elemental vibrations and awakened transmissions. Further, by using diverse sensory modes and orientations in combination with sound, such as visual forms of letters, embodied feelings of sounds, and natural exterior and virtual interior environments, we can consider the ways both traditions experientially facilitate soteriological pathways by producing sonic atmospheres in which a mundane practitioner can become acoustically awakened.

7.3 Nyingma Tantra: Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection

Throughout these considerations of sonic imagination and sonic contemplation, we have witnessed the connections and divergences of the *Secret Matrix* and *Unimpeded Sound* tantras. Generally, both imagine and mobilize sound in broadly parallel terms, including notions that sound cause the confusion of the mundane world and has the capacity to reveal transcendence, and that sounds can be taken up in contemplative practices as part of larger productions of affective atmospheres that can lead to our transcendence. In addition, both texts are concerned with developing a holistic approach to the world through sound. For example, this *Secret Matrix* claims that the forty-two concepts corresponding to the forty-two letters is a holistic representation of the mundane world. Likewise, the five different sources of sound – linguistic, numerical, aesthetic, material, and doctrinal – together represent a holistic view of the world. Each of these mundane wholes are then addressed and transcended through sound.

However, these two texts sharply differ in their details, methodologies, assumptions, and orientations. These differences largely are informed by, and reinforce, the traditional differences between Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection within Nyingma Tantra. We

have traced these different pathways across this dissertation. Here, I would like to offer a few reflecting thoughts to consider these differences across the divides of the material and virtual, exterior and interior, spontaneous and controlled, universal and individualized, and linear structures and expansive arrays. While neither text falls fully to any one of these sides, when viewed together their sonic imaginations and contemplations reveal distinct tendencies for both texts and can help us consider divides between their two larger traditions within Nyingma Tantra at this foundational time in the Tibetan Renaissance.

The *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra is deeply material in character. It is concerned with the physical bodies of practitioners and develops robust instructions for the preparation of intensely sensory material components for contemplative practice. Indeed, these sensory recipes appear three times throughout the commentary. Its primary concern with materiality surrounding sound, though, deals with the elements. The *Unimpeded Sound* places practitioners in specific material environments for their contemplative programs to work. Practitioners must actually listen to the sounds of the elements, not merely imagine them, in order to achieve acoustic awakening. On the other hand, the *Secret Matrix* is invested in the virtual. While its contemplations are contextualized within sexual union (which itself can be virtual), that is only the starting point for its contemplative focus – the visualizations and auralizations of the maṇḍala. Within these virtual realms, transcendent beings are arrayed, conceptual grasping is destroyed, and one is transformed into a buddha.

This difference is closely tied to each text's orientation towards exteriority or interiority. The *Unimpeded Sound* is necessarily listening outward. The exterior

environment is the location of material sounds and must thus be focused on when the natural sounds of our world are privileged. With the *Secret Matrix*'s virtual sounds and spaces, they have the freedom to move their contemplative focus to the interior of the body, directly connected to the Mahāyoga aesthetics of sexuality. In such internal environments, there is the necessity for virtual practices of visualization and auralizations. Apart from tactile experiences that lack the granularity of the visual and aural, there can be no contemplative experience otherwise.

These choices give rise to another set of divergences, which again both align with their larger tradition's aesthetics in approach. In exterior material environments, natural sounds are constantly and spontaneously changing and emerging. Such natural spontaneity is central to Great Perfection aesthetics, which find that spontaneous ease naturally unfolds into the self emergence of transcendent experiences. Internal and virtual auralized sounds, conversely, are neither natural nor spontaneous. Rather, they are controlled sensory experiences, harmonizing with Mahāyoga's approach to contemplation that relies on effort and control to force their bodies and minds into states of awakening.

In the *Unimpeded Sounds* attention to the multiplicity of our natural world, it develops practices that are individualized according to one's body type, abilities, and the natural spaces to which they attune. In this way, they present an expansive array of contemplative practices to fit with any person or situation. Thus, one's particular context and contemplative focus matters deeply for the *Unimpeded Sound* and produces individualized results. The *Secret Matrix*'s controlled and virtual approach entails that anyone can do this practice. Thus, it supplies a universal contemplation that does not take

into account individual contexts. Further, instead of the horizontally expansive suite of contemplations found in the *Unimpeded Sound*, the *Secret Matrix*'s singular approach unfolds in a linear structure that procedurally transforms the practitioner throughout the series of contemplations that narratively build on one another.

7.4 Contributions to the Field

This dissertation has situated itself within four disciplinary fields: Buddhist and tantric studies, sense studies, sound studies, and affect theory. It has taken theoretical and methodological approaches and orientations from each, blending them to explore a time in Tibetan history when the senses and sound were viscerally alive for the imaginative and contemplative projects of Buddhist tantric traditions that offered affective change from confusion and suffering to revelation and liberation. This dissertation thus contributes to each of these fields individually, while also filling a lacuna at the nexus of their juncture.

This dissertation is deeply embedded in Buddhist studies and provides new scholarship to understand the history of Tibetan Buddhism. It accomplishes this through careful attention to the philosophical and contemplative worlds presented by two 11th to 12th century Tibetan Buddhist tantras and their commentaries, unearthing and reconstructing these previously untranslated textual traditions. It both attempts to understand the philosophies and contemplative orientations of each text on their own terms and provides new theoretical perspectives to help in our comprehension of these esoteric, complex, and often confusing texts that are distanced from contemporary Western scholarship by time and culture. Further, it offers new materials, insights, and pathways towards understanding the sensory ways via which Buddhism has historically

been theorized and practiced, contributing to the recent material, sensory, and affective turns in religious studies scholarship. In doing so, it responds to Matthew Kapstein's invocation for "current research on religious experience to address experiences of sight, sound, and the other senses, to which religious value is ascribed."⁴⁰⁵

I have shown throughout this dissertation that these traditions deeply care about sound and the senses. This focus both contributes to gaps in Buddhist and tantric studies and provides further avenues of research for sense and sound studies. The explorations of this dissertation provide new points of reflection when thinking about sensory and sonic cultures, especially in the context of religion. Here, I have explored the ways that sound and the sense of hearing can be taken up in cultural and religious systems to affect our background orientations to the world, perceptions of confusion and truth, structures and connections of our environments and ourselves, and methods for religious forms of freedom. In all these, the texts supply rich accounts of sound which are emblematic of, and influential to, historical Tibetan religious ways of making sense of the world, thus adding to our knowledge of the intricate connections between culture and the senses.

Finally, I have argued throughout this dissertation that our understanding of these religious sensory modalities and pathways can be supported by the theory of affective atmospheres. This idea finds purchase in affect theory, building on this theoretical niche in the field to offer novel ways affective atmospheres can be considered mechanisms for affect production in religions. It also provides a balanced approach between the linguistic and experiential approaches to the study of religion, bridging the gap between the discursive and affective. It finds that religious affect in these Tibetan Buddhist traditions

⁴⁰⁵ Kapstein, *The Presence of Light*, xiii.

is being produced through imagination and contemplation – through the coming together of practices of religious discourse and sensory embodied experiences. This suggests that religious traditions can actively manage and generate affect in ways that correspond to their own aesthetics orientations. Thinking with affective atmospheres can thus give us more nuanced understandings of the ways religions can produce affect and what is required for its production.

7.5 Further Study

The conclusions of this study overflow into new curiosities, questions, and fields. First, there is a greater body of work surrounding these textual traditions at this time, which was beyond the scope of this project. Both the textual traditions studied here are expansive and elaborate, and I have only chosen specific sections that reveal their sonic imaginations and contemplations. However, sound and elemental materiality are broad concerns for the *Unimpeded Sound*, found throughout the text. Likewise, the *Secret Matrix* contains a second contemplative project, it's a wrathful maṇḍala. Like the peaceful maṇḍala studied in this dissertation, the wrathful orientation also is concerned with sound, though not quite as explicitly. Attention to these broader considerations of both traditions should be included in further study of their sonic programs.

Looking at the larger tradition outside and between these texts, there is an important commentary to the *Secret Matrix* Tantra that should also be considered in future work. The commentary by Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo approaches the *Secret Matrix* from a Great Perfection stance, a common move in the broader history of the *Secret Matrix*, which often rides this traditional line. This commentary may help to bridge the Mahāyoga and Great Perfection orientations to sound found in this dissertation and should prove a

helpful artifact in better understanding of the ways sound shapes core components of both traditions. Finally, to better understand the sonic and sensory worlds of Tibetan Buddhism, further study should look outward beyond this period of the Tibetan Renaissance and literary context of Nyingma Tantra to include other histories, genres, and methodologies, including ethnographic study of the ways Tibetan Buddhists use the foundational imaginations and contemplations of these two practice traditions to inform their own religious lives. While the *Unimpeded Sound*'s listening practices are no longer performed, the deity and sexual yogas of the *Secret Matrix* are cornerstones of contemplative programs for Tibetan Buddhists. Understanding the ways practitioners are affectively transformed by the sounds of these practices would provide greater clarity on Tibetan Buddhism's pathways for sensory affect.

The questions of this study also lead to other fields. Materiality was the central concern for the *Unimpeded Sound*, and at least marginally a consideration for the *Secret Matrix*. How might attention to materialist discourses provoke new insights into these texts? What can these texts say about the ways the material world can be superimposed with meaning and how material bodies come together with their own kinds of agency such as seen in network actant theory? On the other hand, what do these texts reveal about the nature of discursive interpretation? Further research into the production of sonic imaginations in these texts might explore hermeneutics as a way to understand the interpretive filters being produced for practitioners. Attending to the ways that these texts seem to bridge interpretive models and embodied experience could give us better understanding into the ways our interpretive frameworks shape our lives. And while sound studies have been at the heart of this dissertation, they contain a wealth of

approaches not covered by this study. For example, technical attention to the designing of acoustic spaces such as seen in the contemplations of these texts can be considered according to the ways they are productive of affect. Further study would attend to the ways such acoustic spaces are being designed, perhaps especially in contemporary ethnography where their acoustic components are more accessible and their impact on experience can be reflected on by practitioners.

Finally, I intend to delve further into the realm of affect. Affect theory is an expansive field; its methodologies, questions, and interests can never be contained within a single study. In this dissertation, I have focused on affective atmospheres as a way of understanding the affective programs of these texts. Even within atmospheric study though, there is broad and sustained interest in exploring the ways people and spaces come together to produce affect. Few of these are either historical or religious in nature, and further consideration of these traditions can fill that lacuna within atmospheric studies of affect. In addition, though, larger concerns with the ways that Tibetan Buddhism and religions use sound and the senses to evoke religious transformative experiences is a curiosity I find centrally emerging at the conclusion of this dissertation. The present study represents only one of many ways this plays out for Tibetan Buddhism. Attuning to the ways that Tibetan Buddhism uses sound and the senses in ritual, philosophy, festival, and contemplation can help us understand pathways for affect in Tibetan Buddhism, and more broadly, in religion.

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Appendix: Tables

Figure 1: Mundane Letter Index for the *Secret Matrix Tantra*

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Inner Mundane Concept</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Outer Mundane Concept</i>
<i>Ta Family</i>	Five Aggregates	<i>Ta Family</i>	Five Elements
<i>Tha</i>	Consciousness	<i>Tha</i>	Space
<i>Ṭa</i>	Form	<i>Ta</i>	Earth
<i>Ḍa</i>	Sensation	<i>Da</i>	Water
<i>Dha</i>	Discrimination	<i>Dha</i>	Fire
<i>Ṇa</i>	Propensity for Action	<i>Na</i>	Wind
<i>Ka Family</i>	Sensory Perceptions	<i>Ca Family</i>	Sense Objects
<i>Ka</i>	Visual perception	<i>Ca</i>	Visual Forms
<i>Kha</i>	Aural perception	<i>Cha</i>	Sounds
<i>Ga</i>	Olfactory perception	<i>Ja</i>	Smells
<i>Gha</i>	Gustatory perception	<i>Jha</i>	Flavors
<i>Nga</i>	Tactile perception	<i>Nya</i>	Body – tactile organ
<i>Pa Family</i>	Sense Organs	Semi-Vowels	Times
<i>Pa</i>	Eye – visual organ	<i>Ya</i>	Past, becoming, spring
<i>Pha</i>	Ear – aural organ	<i>Wa</i>	Present, abiding, summer
<i>Ba</i>	Nose – olfactory organ	<i>Ra</i>	Future, destruction, autumn
<i>Bha</i>	Tongue – gustatory organ	<i>La</i>	Future beings, empty, winter
<i>Ma</i>	Tactile objects	Vowels	Afflictions – Beings
Sibilants etc.	Wrong Views	<i>I</i>	Pride – Gods
<i>Śa</i>	View of Eternalism	<i>Ī</i>	Jealousy – Titans
<i>Ṣa</i>	View of Nihilism	<i>U</i>	Greed – Humans
<i>Sa</i>	View of the Self	<i>Ū</i>	Ignorance – Animals
<i>Ha</i>	View of Characteristics	<i>E</i>	Desire – Tormented Spirits
<i>Kṣa</i>	Mental Consciousness	<i>Ai</i>	Anger – Hell-beings
A	All-ground	<i>O Au: Om</i>	Essential Tactile Perception

Figure 2: Full Letter Index for the *Secret Matrix* Tantra

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Mundane Concept</i>	<i>Transcendent Deity</i>
<i>A</i>	All-ground	Samantabhadrī.
<i>Ṭa</i> Family	Five Aggregates	Primary Male Consorts
<i>Ṭha</i>	Aggregate of Consciousness	Akshobya.
<i>Ṭa</i>	Aggregate of Form	Vairochana.
<i>Ḍa</i>	Aggregate of Sensation	Ratnasambhava.
<i>Ḍha</i>	Aggregate of Discernment	Amithaba.
<i>Ṇa</i>	Aggregate of Propensity for Action	Amoghasiddhi.
<i>Ta</i> Family	Five Elements	Primary Female Consorts
<i>Tha</i>	Space Element	Samatabhadri (Consort of Akshobya).
<i>Ta</i>	Earth Element	Buddha-locana (consort of Vairochana)
<i>Da</i>	Water Element	Mamaki (consort of Ratnasambhava)
<i>Dha</i>	Fire Element	Pandaravasini (consort of Amithaba)
<i>Na</i>	Wind Element	Tara (consort of Amoghasiddhi)
<i>Ka</i> Family	Sensory Perceptions	Male Inner Bodhisattvas, Awakened Mind
<i>Ka</i>	Visual perception	Ksitigarbha, Mind of Vairochana
<i>Kha</i>	Aural perception	Avalokitesvara, Mind of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ga</i>	Olfactory perception	Akashagarbha, Mind of Amitabha
<i>Gha</i>	Gustatory perception	Samantabhadra, Mind of Amoghasiddhi
<i>Nga</i>	Tactile perception	Yamantaka, Destroyer of Mind
<i>Ca</i> Family	Sense Objects	Female Inner Bodhisattvas, Awakened Body
<i>Ca</i>	Visual Forms	Lasyema (Goddess of form), Body of Vairochana
<i>Cha</i>	Sounds	Malema (goddess of sound), Body of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ja</i>	Smells	Girtima (goddess of smell), Body of Amitabha
<i>Jha</i>	Flavors	Nirtima (goddess of flavor), Body of Amoghasiddhi
<i>Nya</i>	Body – the tactile sense organ	Great Power (wrathful deity), Destroyer of Body
<i>Pa</i> Family	Sense Organs	Male Outer Bodhisattvas, Awakened Speech
<i>Pa</i>	Eye – the visual sense organ	Maitreya, Speech of Vairocana
<i>Pha</i>	Ear – the aural sense organ	Nirvirana-Vishkambin, Speech of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ba</i>	Nose – the olfactory sense	Samatabhadra, Speech of Amitabha

	organ	
<i>Bha</i>	Tongue – the Gustatory sense organ	Manjusri, the Speech of Amoghasiddhi
<i>Ma</i>	Tactile objects	Hayagriva, Destroyer of Speech
Semi-Vowels	Times	Offering Goddesses, Awakened Qualities
<i>Ya</i>	Past, becoming, spring	Dhupema (offering goddess of incense), Quality of Vaironchana
<i>Wa</i>	Present, abiding, summer	Metogma (offering goddess of flowers), Quality of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ra</i>	Future, destruction, autumn	Marmema (offering goddess of butter lamps), Quality of Amitabha
<i>La</i>	Future generations, emptiness, winter	Drichabma (offering goddess of perfumed water), Quality of Amoghasiddhi
Sibilants & Aspirate	Wrong Views	Female Wrathful Goddesses
<i>Śa</i>	View of Eternalism	Angkusha (the iron hook lady)
<i>Ṣa</i>	View of Nihilism	Pasa, (the noose lady)
<i>Sa</i>	View of the Self	Iron Chain Lady
<i>Ha</i>	View of Characteristics	Bell Lady
<i>Kṣa</i>	Mental Consciousness	Samantabhadra
Vowels	Afflictions	Six Sages
<i>I</i>	Jealousy	The Subduer/power of gods
<i>Ī</i>	Pride	the subduer/power of demi-gods
<i>U</i>	Greed	the subduer/power of men
<i>Ū</i>	Desire	the subduer/power of hungry ghosts
<i>E</i>	Ignorance	the subduer/power of animals
<i>Ai</i>	Anger	the subduer/power of hell beings
<i>O Au: Om</i>	Essential Tactile Perception	Amrita Kundali

Figure 3: The Five Descents of Sound in the *Unimpeded Sound* Tantra

<i>Deity</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Correspondences</i>	<i>Sounds</i>	<i>Number</i>
Brahma	The 5 Aggregates	5 Afflictions & 5 Elemental Bodies	Alphabet	1000
	<i>Physical Form</i>	<i>Ignorance & Water Body</i>		200
	<i>Sensation</i>	<i>Pride & Earth Body</i>		200
	<i>Discernment</i>	<i>Desire & Fire Body</i>		200
	<i>Propensity for Action</i>	<i>Jealousy & Wind Body</i>		200
	<i>Consciousness</i>	<i>Anger & Space Element (All bodies)</i>		200
Viṣṇu	Enumerations		Numbers	16
	<i>Pervasion & Engagement</i>		<i>Letters</i>	2
	<i>The Five Senses</i>	<i>Sensory objects</i>	<i>Musical instruments</i>	5
	<i>The Six Realms of Beings</i>	<i>Elemental Time</i>		6
	<i>Three States of Mind</i>		<i>Numbers</i>	3
Kalapingka	Beings' Aesthetics		Melodies	360
	<i>Body</i>	<i>Tantric physiology</i>	<i>Letters in Channels</i>	120
	<i>Speech</i>		<i>Intonations</i>	120
	<i>Mind</i>		<i>Breath, Elements, Letters</i>	120
Elements	Four Elements	Gender-Temp. & Interrelations of Elements		4,000
	<i>Water</i>			1,000
	<i>Earth</i>			1,000
	<i>Fire</i>			1,000
	<i>Wind</i>			1,000
Teacher's Voice	Sixty Sensory Capacities	Six Senses & Six Realms	Sixty Melodic Qualities of Buddha Speech	360

Figure 4: Secret Matrix Mantras

<i>Alphabet letter</i>	<i>Seed Syllable</i>	<i>Mantra</i>	<i>Mandala Position</i>	<i>Mundane Concept</i>	<i>Transcendent Deity</i>
	<i>Bhrum</i>	<i>Bhrum vishva vishuddhe</i>			Mt. Meru
Ṭa Family			Central Circle	Five Aggregates	Primary Male Consorts
<i>Ṭha</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung vajra dhrik</i>	Center – right	Aggregate of Consciousness	Akṣobya
<i>Ṭa</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Om jina jik</i>	East – right	Aggregate of Form	Vairocana
<i>Ḍa</i>	<i>Svā</i>	<i>Svā ratna dhik</i>	South – right	Aggregate of Sensation	Ratnasambhava
<i>Ḍha</i>	<i>Ām</i>	<i>Ām aro lik</i>	West – right	Aggregate of Discernment	Amithāba
<i>Ṇa</i>	<i>Dā</i>	<i>Dā prajña dhrik</i>	North– right	Aggregate of Propensity for Action	Amoghasiddhi
Ta Family			Central Circle	Five Elements	Primary Female Consorts
<i>Tha</i>	<i>Mum</i>	<i>Mum dhatvi shva ri</i>	Center – left	Space Element	Samatabhadrī, Consort of Akshobya
<i>Ta</i>	<i>Lam</i>	<i>Lam de sha ra ti</i>	East– left	Earth Element	Buddha-locana, Consort of Vairocana
<i>Da</i>	<i>Ma</i>	<i>Ma moha rati</i>	South– left	Water Element	Mamaki, Consort of Ratnasambhava
<i>Dha</i>	<i>Pap</i>	<i>Pap raga rati</i>	West – left	Fire Element	Pandaravasini, Consort of Amithāba
<i>Na</i>	<i>Tam</i>	<i>Tam vajra rati</i>	North– left	Wind Element	Tara, Consort of Amoghasiddhi
Ka Family			Wall	Sensory Perceptions	Male Inner Bodhisattvas, Awakened Mind
<i>Ka</i>	<i>Kshim</i>	<i>Kshim hira jaya</i>	Eastern Wall	Visual perception	Ksitigarbha, Mind of Vairochana
<i>Kha</i>	<i>Tram</i>	<i>Tram ā garbaya</i>	Southern Wall	Aural perception	Avalokitesvara, Mind of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ga</i>	<i>Hring</i>	<i>Hrim hung padma padam</i>	Western Wall	Olfactory perception	Akashagarbha, Mind of Amitabha
<i>Gha</i>	<i>Jim</i>	<i>Jim kuru pāna hri</i>	Northern Wall	Gustatory perception	Samantabhadra, Mind of Amoghasiddhi
Ca Family			Wall	Sense Objects	Female Inner Bodhisattvas, Awakened Body

<i>Ca</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung lasye samaya stvam</i>	Eastern Wall	Visual Forms	Lasyema (goddess of form), Body of Vairochana
<i>Cha</i>	<i>Tram</i>	<i>Tram male samaya ho</i>	Southern Wall	Sounds	Malema (goddess of sound), Body of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ja</i>		<i>Hri girti rago ho</i>	Western Wall	Smells	Girtima (goddess of smell), Body of Amitabha
<i>Jha</i>			Northern Wall	Flavors	Nirtima (goddess of flavor), Body of Amoghasiddhi
Pa Family			Corners	Sense Organs	Male Outer Bodhisattvas, Awakened Speech
<i>Pa</i>	<i>Mai</i>	<i>Mai dharani sva ha</i>	Southeast corner	Eye – the visual sense organ	Maitreya, Speech of Vairochana
<i>Pha</i>	<i>Thlhim</i>	<i>Thlhim nissaram bhaya svaha</i>	Southwest corner	Ear – the aural sense organ	Nirvirana-Vishkambin, Speech of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ba</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung sara jaya svaha</i>	Northwest corner	Nose – the olfactory sense organ	Samatabhadra, Speech of Amitabha
<i>Bha</i>	<i>Mum</i>	<i>Mum shri aragaya svaha</i>	Northeast corner	Tongue – the Gustatory sense organ	Manjusri, the Speech of Amoghasiddhi
Semi-Vowels			Corners	Times	Offering Goddesses, Awakened Qualities
<i>Ya</i>	<i>Ja</i>	<i>Ja dhupe prawesha</i>	Southeast corner	Past, becoming, spring	Dhupema (offering goddess of incense), Quality of Vaironchana
<i>Wa</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung pushpe awesha</i>	Southwest corner	Present, abiding, summer	Metogma (offering goddess of flowers), Quality of Ratnasambhava
<i>Ra</i>	<i>Bam</i>	<i>Bam dipa sugiri</i>	Northwest corner	Future, destruction, autumn	Marmema (offering goddess of butter lamps), Quality of Amitabha
<i>La</i>	<i>Ho</i>	<i>Ho gandhe citta</i>	Northeast corner	Future generations, emptiness, winter	Drichabma (offering goddess of perfumed water), Quality of Amoghasiddhi
Nasals			Gates	Tactile Sensory	Male Wrathful Gatekeepers

<i>Nga</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung yamanta krita phat</i>	Eastern Gate	Tactile perception	Yamantaka, Destroyer of Mind
<i>Nya</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung bighnanta trita phat</i>	Southern Gate	Body – the tactile sense organ	Great Power, Destroyer of Body
<i>Ma</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung padmanta ktrita phat</i>	Western Gate	Tactile objects	Hayagriva, Destroyer of Speech
<i>O Ai: Om</i>	<i>Hung</i>	<i>Hung prajñana ta krita phat</i>	Northern Gate	Essential Tactile Perception	Amrita Kundali
Sibilants Aspirate			Gates	Wrong Views	Female Wrathful Goddesses
<i>Śa</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Om maha vajra dhara maha boddhi shvari jalini hung phat</i>	East gate – subscript	View of Eternalism	Angkusha, The Iron Hook lady
<i>Ṣa</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Om maharatna dhara maha krodhi shvari jalini hung phat</i>	South gate– subscript	View of Nihilism	Pasa, The Noose Lady
<i>Sa</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Om maha padmadhara mahakrodhi shvari jalini hung phat</i>	West gate– subscript	View of the Self	The Iron Chain Lady
<i>Ha</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Om maha karma dhara maha krodhi shvari jalini hung phat</i>	North gate– subscript	View of Characteristics	The Bell Lady
			Above	Foundation	Primordial Pair
<i>Kṣa</i>	<i>Om</i>	<i>Hung hung hung vajra tsitta om</i>	East – Stacked Seat	Mental Consciousness	Samantabhadra
<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A A A Vajri bhadra samnta a</i>	West – Stacked Seat	All-ground	Samantabhadrī
Vowels			Lotus	Afflictions	Six Sages
<i>I</i>	<i>Krem</i>	<i>Om muni krem svaha</i>	Southeast Lotus seat	Jealousy	The Subduer of gods
<i>Ī</i>	<i>Hung drum</i>	<i>Om muni Hung drum svaha</i>	South Lotus seat	Pride	the subdue of titans
<i>U</i>	<i>Srum</i>	<i>Om muni Srum svaha</i>	Southwest Lotus seat	Greed	the subduer of men

<i>Ū</i>	<i>Prem</i>	<i>Om muni Prem svaha</i>	Nortwest Lotus seat	Desire	the subduer of hungry ghosts
<i>E</i>	<i>Ksham</i>	<i>Om muni Ksham svaha</i>	North Lotus seat	Ignorance	the subduer of animals
<i>Ai</i>	<i>Yid</i>	<i>Om muni Yid svaha</i>	Northeast Lotus seat	Anger	the subduer of hell beings