
SKY DIVINATION

An Elemental Practice from the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*

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Abstract: *This article comprises an introduction to and annotated translation of a pair of passages from the Great Perfection text known as the Unimpeded Sound Tantra (Sgra thal 'gyur) and one of its earliest known commentaries from the twelfth century. The passages describe practices of divination that involve the interpretation of signs in the outer envioning elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, manifesting as omens in the sky. The purpose of this practice, the commentary informs us, is to determine a community's collective karma, understood as their reservoirs of virtue and the consequent likelihood of positive or negative destinies. The theme of community is emphasized throughout the passages in multiple examples: in a narrative that describes the interdependence that exists between human communities and more-than-human beings known as lha (gods); in descriptions of the engagements between human beings and the elemental ecologies in which they are situated; and in the forms of relationship that are implied between the contemplative practitioner and the communities for whom they perform divinations. As such, the article explores how these materials might invite reconsiderations of enduring perceptions of Buddhist contemplatives as world-abdicating renunciates living in exclusion from society, emphasizing instead a vision of contemplative life as immersed within the overlapping social domains of human, non-human, and more-than-human beings.*

INTRODUCTION

This article comprises an introduction to and annotated translation of a pair of passages from an important work of Great Perfection (also known as Dzogchen) contemplative philosophy known as the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and one of its earliest known commentaries dated to the twelfth century.¹ The passages pertain to the tantra's fifty-first sermon, a response by Buddha Vajradhara to the question, "How should we understand the signs of the elements?" The elements in question are the primary elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. The figuration of the elements is an essential framework in Buddhist material philosophy writ large and is a foundationally important concept within the contemplative philosophies of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*. The practice of "sky divination," as I have come to call the otherwise unnamed practice described in these passages, is among many instances of elemental contemplative and ritual practices contained within the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and its commentarial literature.

The tantra describes sky divination as a practice of interpreting the signs of the outer envioning elements, which manifest as omens appearing in the sky. The purpose of this practice, the commentary then informs us, is to determine a community's collective karma—understood as their reservoirs of virtue and the consequent likelihood of positive or negative destinies.

Karma, a Sanskrit word rendered in Tibetan as *lé*, literally means "action" or "activity."² Contrary to popular English-language associations with the term as narrowly referring to



individual consequences corresponding to specific negative acts, karma is understood in this context, and in the Buddhist idiom generally, to refer to the vast cosmological scheme of causality, in which diverse causes and conditions, agents and actions, converge in the production of the material and metaphysical realities of time, transformation, and experience. Since intention is understood to be a key criterion for causality within Buddhist philosophy, karma also entails an ethical or moral dimension, such that moral choice is linked to the patterns of cause and effect that govern all aspects of existence.

In the context of the following passages on sky divination, karma is understood to operate within a network of relations that include both humans and more-than-human actors—namely, the godly beings known as *lha* and their various emissaries, whose fates, these passages explain, are intimately interconnected.³ Consequently, the collective virtue or non-virtue of human beings is not only theorized to produce effects within the human community but also within communities of non-human others in the broader cosmic ecology, implying an ethical appeal to human beings' sense of responsibility to these others.

The “sky” in sky divination corresponds to the Tibetan word *namkha*, the same word that is used to refer to the element of space, included within the quintet of the five elements.⁴ Space, as such, represents the foundational (non-)substance from which the remaining elements, and by extension the entire material world, emerge. I refer to the forms of prognostication described here as “sky divination” because of the special role the sky (or space) plays within these divinatory practices as a medium that simultaneously connects human beings to each other and to the more-than-human *lha* since the sky represents a public and universal context in which these signs are displayed.

In this way, the themes of community and interconnection between living beings within and through the elements are emphasized in the sermon on sky divination, in multiple imbricated ways: in descriptions of the engagements between human beings and the elemental ecologies in which they are situated, in a narrative form that describes the interdependence between human communities and the *lha*, and in the relational dynamics that are implied between the contemplative practitioner and the communities for whom divinations are performed.

Bringing attention to these three dimensions of the practice, this article explores how these materials might invite reconsiderations of enduring perceptions of Buddhist contemplatives as world-abdicating renunciates living in exclusion of society, emphasizing instead a vision of contemplative life as immersed within the overlapping social domains of human, non-human, and more-than-human beings.

THE SOURCES: THE *UNIMPEDED SOUND TANTRA* AND COMMENTARY

The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is one among the collection of tantras known as the Seventeen Great Perfection Tantras, a foundationally significant collection of texts belonging to the Great Perfection Heart Essence tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.⁵ The Great Perfection Heart Essence is a body of philosophies, doctrines, and contemplative practices associated with the corpus of literature known as the instruction series of the Great Perfection tradition of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.⁶

The Seventeen Tantras are understood to have been spoken by a primordial buddha and then transmitted over the course of multiple centuries through a variety of means, including teacher-student disclosures, concealments, and revelations as literary treasure known as *terma*.⁷ Vimalamitra (c. eighth century) is credited with first concealing the Seventeen Tantras, which were subsequently retrieved by Dangma Lhüngyel (c. eleventh century) from the Temple of the Hat in Uru.⁸ Today, the tantras can be found in the Collected Works of the Nyingma.⁹ Their inclusion in the Nyingma canon speaks to their ongoing importance within the tradition across multiple centuries. They remain important and well-known texts within the tradition today.¹⁰

Vimalamitra's commentaries on the tantras are less well known and less frequently studied in the present day. There are six extant commentaries belonging to this collection that can be found in an anthology of Nyingma collected works known as the Extensive Collection of the Spoken Tradition, the most prominent source of which is a twentieth-century edition compiled by the students of Khenpo Münsel (1916–1993).¹¹ Importantly, this collection is distinct from another set of Seventeen Tantras commentaries attributed to Vimalamitra, located within the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra collection.¹² The precise dating of the commentaries located in the Extensive Collection remains provisional. However, it is notable that these commentaries make frequent intertextual reference to some texts in the early Great Perfection Heart Essence repertory, such as those associated with the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra and the various tantras contained within the Seventeen Tantras collection, but not to later texts, such as those contained within the Heart Essence of the *Dākinī* collection, dated to the fourteenth century.¹³ On this basis, I and others believe that the commentaries were produced in the twelfth century, and almost certainly no later than the middle of the thirteenth century.¹⁴

The *Unimpeded Sound* is traditionally considered the root tantra of the Seventeen Tantras collection, the foundational text from which the remaining compositions are considered in some way to be derived. Indeed, the *Unimpeded Sound* is among the longer and more topically rich tantras in the collection. Together with its commentary, the *Unimpeded Sound* represents a remarkable collection of Great Perfection philosophies, practices, and ideas, stemming from an early period of the tradition's development in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It is therefore an especially valuable resource providing perspectives of the nascent Great Perfection Heart Essence tradition at a time when this distinctive system of theory and practice—which has since become the dominant form of the Great Perfection tradition—was yet on the margins of the Tibetan religious and cultural world.

THE ELEMENTS IN THE GREAT PERFECTION HEART ESSENCE

The figuration of the elements—sometimes rendered in terms of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, or sometimes adding a fifth element of space, or a sixth element of consciousness—is an important cosmological idea found in many contexts across Buddhist intellectual history. Generally speaking, Buddhist elemental theories propose that the elements constitute the basic properties that form the entirety of the material world. This includes both the outer material world of land, water, and air in the surrounding environment and the inner material world of beings, including the flesh, bone, and fluid within our bodies. The interpenetration of the outer and inner, mediated by and through the elements, is understood to account for the relationship between sentient beings and their environments—including how the matter of our bodies and the matter of

our surroundings interact and impact one another. As such, the elements have played a critical role in many areas of South Asian, Buddhist, and Indigenous Himalayan thought and practice, including philosophies, cosmologies, rituals, medicine, astrology, and divination. As part of a continuous transmission of Buddhist ecological thought across Tibet and the Himalayas, elemental theories and practices have also found expression in Himalayan Buddhist responses to novel contemporary concerns associated with anthropogenic climate change.¹⁵

Though the enduring importance of the elements in Buddhism in general, and in the Great Perfection Heart Essence in particular, is evidenced across the tradition's major canons, the elements are arguably of special concern in the *Unimpeded Sound*. Here, the elements are situated among the “five cosmogonic aural descents” (*sgra yi babs so*) five kinds of sound theorized by the text to form the foundations of the universe.¹⁶ In addition to the sheer number of references to the elements that can be found throughout the text, the importance of the elements within this textual system is attested by the fact that the first sermon of the tantra, following the text's elaborate introduction (*gleng gzhi, nidāna*), addresses the question, “What is the purpose of the elements?”¹⁷ Accordingly, the tantra's first chapter contains a wealth of distinctive Great Perfection elemental theories and practices, including elemental cosmologies, systems of astrology and timekeeping, human anatomy, medicine, and theories of meditation.

ELEMENTAL DIVINATION AND PROGNOSTICATION IN THE *UNIMPEDED SOUND*

The passages I focus on below describe a distinctive practice of divination found within the fifty-first sermon of the *Unimpeded Sound*'s first chapter, a response to a question posed to Buddha Vajradhara by his interlocutor—that is, “How are the signs of the elements apprehended?”¹⁸

There are multiple and diverse practices of divination involving the elements described throughout the *Unimpeded Sound* and its commentary. Historically and today in Tibet, the Himalayas, and the Tibetan diaspora, there are many traditions of divination, known as *mo*, performed by skilled practitioners. Perhaps most well known are those divinations done with dice, shells, or with the beads of a *mālā*, or rosary. These practices function by producing “random signs,” by the fall of the dice, for instance, which the practitioner then connects to “stock prognoses” often in the form of pithy verses contained in an accompanying prognostic text.¹⁹ But there are other types of divination in the Tibetan Buddhist world. One of these types, also considered under the broad category of *mo*, consists of practices that take as their basis a set of culturally coherent standard signs, such as those evident in dreams, or in the behavior of birds, or on the basis of formations in the landscape.²⁰ Another type of Tibetan prognostication consists of calculative (*rtsis*) practices that take the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind as the governing principles of matter and time, and on that basis function to algorithmically calculate the elements' combinations, determining favorable and unfavorable conditions for particular activities.²¹

These latter two types of divination—those which prognosticate based on standard signs and those involving calculation—are found in great abundance in the *Unimpeded Sound*'s first chapter. In the context of the Great Perfection contemplative practices known as the “yogas of the four [elemental] sounds” (*sgra bzhi rnal 'byor*), for instance, we find a practice of interpreting signs that arise within fire to discern the outcomes of one's contemplative practice: “The yogi possessing

a body of fire and supreme faith,” the text tells us, “should make a fire using logs the size of their body, as many as they have years of age, and perform divinations in the fire.”²² According to the *Unimpeded Sound* commentary, these divinations entail interpreting the colors and shapes that appear in the fire as a set of standard signs. How the practitioner ought to engage with a particular obstacle to contemplation is indicated by the colors that appear in the fire—white, blue-black, yellow, and red represent the four enlightened activities of pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and subjugating, respectively. The fire’s diverse shapes depict the practitioner’s destined level of actualization: a spinning blade, a layered stūpa, lotuses, canopies, and banners are among those symbols that represent the *ordinary* achievements, whereas a wheel, a jewel, a lotus, a sword, a conch, or a volume of scripture can indicate the *extraordinary* achievements of the practice.²³ This is described in the following passage of the commentary to the *Unimpeded Sound*’s fortieth sermon (1.40):

The individual colors are white, blue-black, bright yellow, lustrous red, and so forth. They indicate pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and subjugating: pacifying is white, enriching is yellow, magnetizing is red, and subjugating is blue-black. Then you analyze the shapes of the fire: a variegated spinning blade, a layered stūpa, lotuses, fluttering canopies and banners, and the forms of living beings—these are the signs of accomplishing the ordinary achievements. A wheel, a vajra, a jewel, a lotus, a sword, a club, divine forms, a volume of scripture, and a layered, spiraling conch—these shapes are said to [indicate] the perfect accomplishment of the extraordinary achievement.²⁴

Thus, through interpretation of these standard signs, appearing as shapes in the fire, contemplative practitioners can ameliorate obstacles to practice and divine contemplative outcomes.

The *Unimpeded Sound*’s system of elemental calculation theorizes that each of the elements moves through cycles of phases, resulting in the regular patterns of transformation that account for time as a dynamic process.²⁵ This movement of time is codified in terms of four elements—earth, water, fire, and wind—in connection with a series of three elemental phases—namely, concentrating, dispersing, and balancing.²⁶ These phases represent numerous divisions or periods of time, such as a water-concentrating or fire-balancing time, for instance, resulting in twelve combinations. This framework becomes the basis for ordering and characterizing periods of time across orders of magnitude, including hours, weeks, months, years, and generations, each of which can be said at any given time to consist of one of the twelve predominant elemental combinations. These calculations are also used to determine an individual’s natal elemental constitution, described as a body of water, a body of earth, a body of fire, or a body of wind, based on the condition of the environing elements at the time of birth. With this knowledge in hand, practitioners can chart the course of an individual’s life, determining favorable and unfavorable periods and, importantly, prescribe such diverse factors as diet, medicine, and regimens of contemplative practice to optimize their lifestyle according to their particular elemental body.²⁷

The following passages on sky divination present yet another iteration of elemental prognostication found within the *Unimpeded Sound*, in which formations of the elements in the surrounding environment function as signs indicating the karmic propensities of individuals and communities. As the elements are understood to form the foundational architecture of the material

world, their manifestation as perceptible natural phenomena is configured as a set of standard signs within the divinatory theory of the practice. These meteorological signs are then interpreted with reference to the elemental time in which the signs occurred by means of calculation. Thus, these divinations entail first interpreting signs in the “outer elements” (*phyi rol gyi 'byung ba'i rtags*), appearing as a series of twelve favorable and unfavorable signifiers, understood to be manifested through the superhuman manipulation of the clouds by the beings known as the “guardians of the four directions” (*phyogs skyong*). The signs include (1) winds, (2) mists, (3) sounds, (4) lights, (5) earthquakes, (6) solar and lunar eclipses, (7) special kinds of snow and rainfall, (8) holy teachings, (9) negative speech (coming from the sky), (10) shooting stars falling to earth, (11) images (in the sky), and (12) the thorough purity of an empty clear sky.²⁸ These elemental signs are then deciphered with reference to the time of their occurrence in the annual cycle, making this practice of sky divination a hybrid prognostication method involving both the interpretation of standard signs and calculative praxis.

SKY DIVINATION: AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF SERMON 1.51

The following is an annotated presentation of the tantra's fifty-first sermon, together with its corresponding passages in the commentary. A relatively brief sermon in the tantra, it begins with a verse describing the predominant qualities traditionally associated with each of the five elements—earth's hardness, fire's heat, water's cohesion, and so on. The sermon then shifts to a discussion of how a contemplative practitioner, a yogi, who is well established in the tradition's elemental practices, is able to interpret a set of twelve meteorological signs or miraculous displays—manifestations of the outer elements' intelligent orchestration. The sermon concludes with a statement about how, through deciphering their predictive meaning, these interpretations serve to benefit the human community. Here I include a translation of sermon 1.51 in the tantra, in its entirety:

The characteristics of the outer elements are hardness [Earth],
heat and burning [fire], cohesion and wetness [water],
lightness and differentiation [wind], and pervasion [space].

By means of the sections of this tantra on training in the elements,
the yogi, with his body and speech,
takes hold of these characteristics,
as well as the specific times of the twelve-year cycle,
and applies them accordingly to himself.
He takes account of the specific start times,
sounds, oral instructions, and so on.

Then, because the gods had the worldly protectors
make eleven of the twelve visible miraculous displays appear,
these signs can now be perceived as omens.

Karma can also be precisely determined by means of the miraculous display

which is the mode of these signs' vanishing into the sky itself.

Thus, starting from the direction in which he stands,
the east for example and so on,
the virtue and non-virtue
of kings, important people, the public, and so on,
are definitively interpreted.²⁹

The commentary offers little in the way of technical details for these divinations, perhaps suggesting that the procedures for these practices are self-evident to the commentary's intended readers or are otherwise presumed to be disclosed extra-textually by an experienced teacher. Instead, the commentary begins with a lengthy narrative explaining the reason for these practices' invention. According to the commentary, in a degenerate age, the godly beings known as *lha*—whose fates, we learn, are intimately linked with that of humans—create these omens as a way of showing human beings their own merit, or lack thereof. The story is set in Jambudvīpa. Sometimes interpreted to refer to the rose apple or a species of plum, the Land of the Jambu Tree, or Jambu Continent, refers to the domain of human beings in Buddhist cosmologies.³⁰ The setting is established as follows in the commentary:

When the Buddha's teachings decline during the final five hundred years of the period known as the "dregs of time," living beings make their clothes and so forth black. The southern Jambu Continent, exalted beyond the other continents, is a place beyond other places. Here, in the Jambu Continent there are those we might call "wicked" who, while maintaining the external form of the holy Dharma, do not act appropriately. They belittle the words of the Buddha and fabricate lies, dilute the special secret mantra like milk in the marketplace is diluted with water, set forth perverted views and meditations, and then bring forth many discordant attitudes.

At this time, through the influence of these things, many troublesome demons emerge, and people's behavior changes. They claim understanding of the teachings they do not understand, claim special intentions in texts where there are no intentions, claim visions where there are no such visions, claim signs of meditative heat where there is no heat, and claim to have witnessed the face of the deity when they have not. Even the monastics cease caring for their own assembly halls and instead take part in sectarian arguments, guarding their bodies with weapons. These are the numerous discordant omens that arise.³¹

Following this narrative introduction, the text puts forward a theory of interdependence between humans, the godly *lha*, the earthly demons known as *dü*, and their emissaries known as *nyül lé*. Evidently, when human beings are engaged in activities that "accord with the Dharma," not only does the collective merit of human beings increase, but the merit of the gods increases as well. Likewise, the *nyül lé*, who are known to torment human beings, also torment the gods. For these reasons, we are told, the *lha* have a vested interest in the activities of human beings:

In the Jambu Continent, when people act in ways that accord with the Dharma, the merit of the gods increases. When those wicked people emerge, the gods are defeated in battle and their merit decreases . . . At this time, the earthly demons, who reject the ways of the Buddha, the vanquisher of Māra, dispatch the *nyül lé* spirits, who settle upon the hearts of the beings of the Jambu Continent and set loose a multiplicity of distortions.

With their powers lost, defeated in battle, the gods will go to the temple of suffering and pray:

Since all those people with avarice and attachment are doing inappropriate Dharma, our merit declines, alas, because of their faults. May all those with avarice and attachment in this Jambu Continent be born in hell.³²

The reference to the temple of suffering is an intriguing detail. Speakers of Tibetan will understand the humor immediately: In common Tibetan parlance, *lha khang*, temple or literally the “house of the gods,” is the term used to refer to a space in a home or community in which the Buddhist altar is placed.³³ Often it refers to the space of monastic assembly and ritual practice in a Buddhist monastery. The implication here is that, as human beings go to the temple of the gods to intervene in karmic fates via the gods, when the gods pray, they go to the *nya ngen khang*, the temple of suffering, and pray for karmic intervention via human beings—whose condition of life, relative to the gods, is characterized by distress.³⁴ Though a minor detail, the reference to the temple of suffering illustrates an important theme that this sermon of the tantra brings to the fore—namely, the emphasis on the symmetrical correspondences between humans and the gods that bind them in a symbiotic relationship.

The *lha*, without recourse to their human allies, enlist the help of the guardians of the four directions to create a series of omens by which human beings can interpret their merit:

At this time, because the gods, who are protectors of the Jambu Continent, lack capacity due to the decline in merit, there is a display of disease, famine, demons, and various discordant things. They implore the guardians of the four directions to display various kinds of virtue and non-virtue, praying:

As for what is good and what is bad in the Jambu Continent, show the human beings good and bad, virtue and non-virtue, in dependence upon twelve miraculous signs in the sky.

And because they are implored, the guardians of the four directions, to teach sentient beings in the Jambu Continent through signs, demonstrate what is good and what is bad by means of the clouds as (1) winds, (2) mists, (3) sounds, (4) lights, (5) earthquakes, (6) solar and lunar eclipses, (7) special kinds of snow and rainfall, (8) holy Dharma, and (9) negative speech [coming from the sky], (10) shooting stars falling to earth, (11) images in the sky, and (12) the thorough purity of an empty clear sky.³⁵

In multiple ways, then, the fortunes of the gods and human beings intertwine—when human beings' stores of virtue decrease, the merit of the gods likewise decreases, and consequently, disease, demons, and famine proliferate in the human realm. The gods, therefore, conscript the guardians of the four directions who, through the manipulation of the clouds, convey to human beings the status of their fortunes.³⁶

The commentary further advises that practitioners perform prognostic calculations to appropriately interpret the meaning of these omens in the context of the times in which they occur in the annual cycle. The procedures for performing calculations relative to the signs are described in the commentary as follows:

Moreover, practitioners correlate the twelve elemental signs with determined specific times starting from the first month of the beginning of the year, i.e., the third day of the first Mouse month of the given year. On the basis of the particular details of the formations, black clouds, and so on, merit and non-merit are taught. This is explained in *The Secret Sun*. The key point to understand about these transformations of things is that they function to benefit other sentient beings through ascertaining good and evil, pleasure and pain, in the three realms.³⁷

The technical details of this section of the commentary are particularly enigmatic and therefore difficult to interpret. What seems evident from the commentary's injunctions, however, is that the interpretation of signs' significance depends on the day that the signs occur during the month and year, according to a particular calendrical scheme involving the twelve houses of the Tibetan zodiac, traditionally construed as animals, corresponding to the twelve months of the year. But apart from the indication that the "mouse month" is considered the first lunar month of the year, there are no additional details provided to make sense of this calendrical scheme. One possibility, as suggested above, is that the third day of each of the twelve months of the year represents a special time in which these examinations of the external signs can take place. But because these lines of the commentary are especially terse, they could also be interpreted to mean that there is only one day annually in which these interpretations take place—namely, the third day of the first month of the new lunar year. Or, perhaps, it is the case that each elemental sign corresponds to a month of the year and a house of the Tibetan zodiac, during which time it is to be received as a negative omen.

Speculation aside, what is apparent is that these elemental signs, such as black clouds, are not an entirely uncommon meteorological occurrence, and therefore cannot be interpreted to have predictive meaning in the absence of certain temporal constraints, as determined through calculation. Other details from the tantra, such as the criteria for examining the twelve signs, what each of the signs means vis-à-vis positive or negative karma, or how to analyze the quality of the signs' mode of disappearance, remain among the many outstanding curiosities motivating future studies into Heart Essence literature and, in particular, the text cited in the commentary as the *Secret Sun*.

The commentary to the sermon concludes that "in dependence upon the signs of the *outer* elements, the particulars of the karma of *internal* sentient beings are indicated in the scripture"—a reference to a common Buddhist expression for the world in terms of the container and its

contents, consisting of the inner world of sentient beings and the outer superstructure of the cosmological environment.³⁸

HUMAN AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN ECOLOGIES

In multiple ways, the sermon and its commentary convey a vision of Buddhist contemplative life integrated with the natural and cosmological environment. In the first place, the sermon presents the elements as a governing cosmological structure that mediates and weaves together inner and outer, human and more-than-human worlds. This entwining of inner and outer worlds finds expression in the final lines of the commentary in terms of the Buddhist idiom of the container (the environment) and its contents (sentient beings), where the sermon posits the interconnection between the inner karmic dimension of human beings' moral lives and consequent manifestations of signs in the outer environing elements.

The practice of divination, in this instance, is made possible not only by the practitioner's ability to perceive these signs but also by the application of calculative knowledge by which they are able to appropriately interpret the signs' meaning according to the time at which they occur. The verses in the tantra indicate that these kinds of prognostications require the skilled expertise of a contemplative practitioner, a yogi in whom the elements and their qualities are well integrated or, more literally, "well-connected together."³⁹ As I interpret it, this refers to a yogi who is trained in the various elemental practices promoted by the tradition, who has both the technical know-how required to perform calculations and, we might well presume, the personal knowledge of their own constitutive elemental makeup since both are portrayed throughout the text as necessary bases of knowledge to bring about various ritual outcomes successfully. In this way, both the inner world of the yogi's elemental constitution and the outer world of the elemental environment are understood to influence and imprint upon one another, such that the metaphor of the container and its contents extends down to the very matter of the yogi's body.

These passages bring to the fore important notions of community and kinship between human beings and more-than-human others. This is present, in the first place, in the descriptions of human and more-than-human flourishing and the interdependence between humans and *lha*. As the collective virtue or non-virtue of human beings manifests as kinds of karmic retribution both in the human *and* in the more-than-human dimensions, the narrative positions human beings' moral decision-making as consequential for living beings both within and beyond human societies. But the theme of social responsibility also exists, we could say, extra-textually in the implication that these practices are intended to be performed by contemplative practitioners on behalf of human communities whose fortunes are knit together by virtue of communal relationships. Illustrating this is the concluding verse to the sermon in the tantra, which indicates that these practices will "definitively indicate the virtue and non-virtue of kings, important people, the public, and so forth."

These passages may therefore be taken to convey something of how these contemplative scholars, who were the earliest inheritors of Great Perfection Heart Essence texts and practices in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, understood themselves as enmeshed within multiple, imbricated community systems consisting of both human and more-than-human spiritual economies of exchange and collaboration. As such, humans, gods, the directional guardians, and other spirits such as the *nyül lé* and the *dü* all can be said to coexist within an ecology—a relational system of

living beings maintaining a social homeostasis. The inherently communal nature of the sky, both as a mediating substrate between the domains of humans and gods as well as a shared context for human beings equally, is made to function as the cosmic theater in which our collective fate is made legible.

NOTES

¹ The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is known as *Dra tel gyur* (*Sgra thal 'gyur*) in Tibetan. See endnote number 5 for additional information on the tantra's title.

² In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *las*.

³ In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *lha*.

⁴ In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *nam mkha'*.

⁵ The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is officially titled the *Great Tantra of the Precious All-Creative Unimpeded Sound*, or *Rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po'i rgyud*. It is considered the root text of the Seventeen Great Perfection Tantras (*Rdzogs chen rgyud bcu bdun*) of the Great Perfection Heart Essence (*Rdzogs chen snying thig*) tradition.

⁶ The instruction series, or *menngak dé* (*man ngag sde*) is a doxographical category specific to the Nyingma Great Perfection tradition. The other two categories in this system of classification are the *semdé* (*sems sde*) and *longdé* (*klong sde*).

⁷ In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *gter ma*. See Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 490–502, 555.

⁸ The Temple of the Hat is also known as the Zha Temple or *zhé lhakhang* (*zhwa'i lha khang*). See Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 556.

⁹ The Collected Works of the Nyingma or Nyingma Gyübum (*Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*) is a canon of Nyingma works that was first published as a consolidated work toward the end of the eighteenth century. Its organizational structure consists of three doxographical categories of Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga (*rnal 'byor chen po; rjes su rnal 'byor; rdzogs pa chen po shin tu rnal 'byor*). The Seventeen Tantras are located in the Atiyoga division of the Collected Works of the Nyingma, but they are also circulated as separate collection. See Cantwell and Mayer, *Kīlaya Nirvāṇa Tantra and the Vajra Wrath Tantra*, 1.

¹⁰ Cantwell and Mayer, *Kīlaya Nirvāṇa Tantra and the Vajra Wrath Tantra*, 1.

¹¹ The main source for the commentaries is the Extensive Collection of the Spoken Transmission (*Bka ma shin tu rgyas pa*, a.k.a., *Bka' ma*) compiled by Khenpo Münsel. Other extant copies of the *Bka' ma* belonging to the same recension line as the Khenpo Münsel edition are: (1) a *KaH thog* edition compiled by Kathog Khenpo Jamyang, (2) a *Pal yul* edition, and (3) a computer-input edition by Tsering Gyatso, referred to here as the *Snga 'gyur* edition. There also appears to be a second recension line of uncertain origin, which was propagated in Central Tibet. In the late twentieth century, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (Nam mkha'i Nor bu, 1938–2018) prepared a critical edition and a preferred-reading edition of the commentary to the *Sgra thal 'gyur* based on these two recensions. My translations are based on the Tsering Gyatso computer-input edition, with other editions consulted. See: Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel*, in *Bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, ed. KaH thog Mkhon po 'Jam dbyangs, vols. 110–111 (KaH tog Mkhon po 'Jam dbyangs, 1999); Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel*, in *Snga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, vol. 107 (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009); and Vimalamitra (Pan chen Dri med Bshes gnyen), *Rtsa rgyud sgra thal 'gyur gyi 'grel pa rin po che snang byed gron ma*, ed. Chos rgyal Nam mkha'i Nor bu, (Australia: Chos rgyal Nam mkha'i Nor bu, 2009).

¹² The Heart Essence of Vimalamitra is known as *Bima Nyingtik* (*Bi ma snying thig*) in Tibetan.

¹³ The Heart Essence of the Dākinī is known as *Khandro Nyingtik* (*Mkha 'gro snying thig*) in Tibetan.

¹⁴ Khenpo Yeshe's forthcoming dissertation will further clarify the dating of these texts. See also Khenpo Yeshe, "The Origins of the Rdzogs chen Eleven Words and Meanings: Comparing Nyi ma 'bum, Klong chen pa, and Rig 'dzin Rgod lden".

¹⁵ See for example the pamphlet issued by Bhutan's Royal Society for the Protection of Nature: *Rang bzhin gnas stangs dang nang pa'i chos gnyis kyi mnyam 'brel / Buddhism and the Environment*.

¹⁶ See Anonymous, *Sgra thal 'gyur*, in *Rnying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1 (A 'dzom chos sgar, 2000), 18–22. See also Liddle, "Acoustic Awakening: Sound and Sonic Imagination in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra," 96–126, for a detailed analysis of the formulation of aural descents (*sgra yi babs so*).

¹⁷ Anonymous, *Sgra thal 'gyur* (A 'dzom chos sgar, 2000), 10.

¹⁸ Anonymous, *Sgra thal 'gyur* (A 'dzom chos sgar, 2000), 12: *phyi rol 'byung rtags gang gis 'dzin*.

¹⁹ I borrow the phrases "random signs," "standard signs," and "stock prognosis" from Jan-Ulrich Sobisch's analysis of divination practices in *Divining with Achi and Tārā*, 1–2.

²⁰ Sobisch, *Divining with Achi and Tārā*, 2.

²¹ Sobisch, *Divining with Achi and Tārā*, 2.

²² Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel*, in *Snga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, vol. 107 (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 457.

²³ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 457–458.

²⁴ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 457–458.

²⁵ Elemental calculation translates the Tibetan term *jung tsi* ('byung rtsis).

²⁶ These terms—concentrating, dispersing, and balancing—attempt to render the Tibetan terms *zuk* (zug), *jer* (byer), and *nyom* (snyoms), respectively.

²⁷ One can note for instance in the quotation above introducing fire prognostications that the text specifies that the practice should be done by a “yogi possessing a body of fire and supreme faith.” The body of fire is a reference to the practitioner’s natal elemental constitution, an elemental body type in which the fire element predominates. Such references to performing contemplative practices according to the individual’s elemental body type are common in the *Unimpeded Sound*.

²⁸ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 571.

²⁹ Anonymous, *Sgra thal 'gyur* (A 'dzom chos sgar, 2000), 86–87.

³⁰ The *Dharmasaṃgraha* attributed to Nāgārjuna identifies the four continents of the Buddhist cosmology as Pūrvavideha, Jambudvīpa, Aparagodānī, and Uttarakurudvīpa. See Nagarjuna, *The Dharma Samgraha: An Ancient Collection of Buddhist Technical Terms*, 29, 64. But Jambudvīpa as the domain of human beings has precedents prior to the advent of Buddhism in India, with references to Jambūdīvā [sic] as this world in the Mahābhārata. On this and the European mistranslation of Jambu as rose apple rather than plum, see Wujastyk, “Jambudvīpa: Apples or Plums?”

³¹ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 572. In this first paragraph I take *gos* following the Lhasa recension, as opposed to *g.yo* in the *Bka' ma*; an alternative reading of *ras gcod dang gzu lum*, a critical reading advised by David Germano based on the Lhasa recension’s reading of *bzung lums dang ras gcod du* and *ras chod dang gzu lum* in the *Bka' ma*; the reading of *'dus* following the Lhasa recension corrected from *dus* in the *Bka' ma*; the Lhasa recension’s insertion of *ltar* in *'o ma ltar slod*. In the second paragraph I have taken the Lhasa reading of *skyong* rather than *bskyod* found in the *Bka' ma*.

³² Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 571–572. Here, I follow the Lhasa recension which has *'bri bas*, rather than the *Bka' ma* which has *'bribs*, which is probably an inputting error. I also follow the Lhasa versions of the text which have the genitive *gi* and *gyi* rather than the instrumental/agentive *gis* and *gyis* in the *Bka' ma*.

³³ In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *lha khang*.

³⁴ In Tibetan Wylie transliteration, *mya ngan khang*.

³⁵ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 571–572.

³⁶ On the four guardians of the directions (*phyogs skyong*), see Wessels-Mevissen, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*.

³⁷ See Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 575.

³⁸ Vimalamitra, *Sgra thal 'gyur rtsa rgyud 'grel* (Tshe ring rgya mtsho, 2009), 575–576.

³⁹ The phrase “well-connected together” attempts to render the Tibetan *rang dang mthun par legs sbyar*.

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