

# Listening with the Gods: Offering, Beauty and Being in Tibetan Ritual Music

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## 1. Introduction

**T**his study starts with a double functional and hermeneutical question: what is the role of music in Tibetan ritual, and what is its meaning to the ritual practitioner? As we will see, the first part of the question is relatively easily answered, while the second necessitates a move beyond a functional framing and towards aesthetic concerns and issues of selfhood and identity. Music, in the context of Tibetan ritual, is used as one of a set of offerings (*mchod pa*)<sup>1</sup> congruent with the human senses that are offered to the deities of the ritual. Music is merely one component of these ritual offerings, though perhaps the most dramatic to the observer sitting in a monastic hall and feeling the vibrations of the drums, cymbals and trumpets deep in their body. The intent of the music is to offer a pleasing sound to the deities invoked in the ritual. In descriptions of ritual music, aesthetic adjectives of “pleasing” and “beautiful” are common. Looking at a range of Tibetan language sources, we see that while descriptors such as “pleasing” and “beautiful” are often used, there is, on the other hand, little explication of just what constitutes a “beautiful” sound. I propose that motivation is a key element in the offering of a beautiful sound. Motivation is a central determining factor in Tibetan religious practice and acts as bridge across, on the one hand, the functional role of music in ritual and, on the other, aesthetic considerations of the beautiful and pleasing. As supports for this bridge, I suggest that Paul Ricœur’s theories of emplotment and “being-as” can assist in moving away from questions such as the “role of music in ritual” and towards a formulation of Tibetan ritual music as an indivisible element in an experiential expansion of horizons of selfhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Tibetan terms and names in parentheses are transliterations using the Wylie system. As much as possible, however, simplified transcriptions will be used throughout the text (with a transliteration in Wylie in brackets at the first occurrence).

## 2. *Mchod pa: Music as a ritual offering*

The music heard in Tibetan monastic rituals is one of a set of offerings given to the deity of that particular ritual. These offerings are generally construed in a set of 7 (*mchod pa bdun*) or 8 (*mchod pa brgyad*). In both cases, the range of offerings is intended to delight all of the senses. Flowers, for example, are offered as a beautiful sight, incense as a pleasing smell. Music is directed toward the ears of the deity, though as we will see, it also has a mental component.

References to the Eight offerings are found in the *Kangyur* (*Bka' 'gyur*), for example, from the "Tantra of the Great Magical Web of the Goddess" (*lha mo sgyu 'phrul dra ba chen po'i rgyud*) we read,

Offer with praise through the eight offerings<sup>2</sup>

In the "Root Tantra of Chenrezig" (*Spyan ras gzigs kyi rtsa rgyud*) instructions are given to

Set out and arrange the Eight offerings<sup>3</sup>

In the *Tengyur* (*Bstan 'gyur*) and in the writings of individual authors we find further, more detailed descriptions with specific desirable qualities associated with the offerings. From the "In Praise of Wisdom Illuminating White Varahi", is an abbreviated list which includes music,

Having taken up in awareness (*blo*) flowers, incense, butter lamps and perfumed water, food, music and whatever more there is, offer with a respectful mind (*yid*).<sup>4</sup>

Terdag Lingpa (Gter bdag gling pa, 1646-1714), one of the founders of Mindroling monastery which was known for its arts, wrote about music as offering in this poetical passage:

Food of a hundred tastes, melodies and ritual music,  
Offer all these good offerings increasing like an ocean of clouds.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Mchod pa brgyad kyis bstod par mchod* (*Bka' 'gyur / dpe bsdur ma*), Volume 103: 10).

<sup>3</sup> *Mchod pa brgyad bshams te* (*Bka' 'gyur / dpe bsdur ma*), Volume 91: 863).

<sup>4</sup> *Me tog bdug spos mar me dang / dri chab zhal zas rol mo ci mchis rnam / blo yis blangs nas gus pa'i yid kyis mchod* (*Slob dpon kong ba sbyin*, in *Btsan 'gyur / dpe bsdur ma*, Vol.12: 774).

<sup>5</sup> *Ro brgya zas dbyangs snyan rol mo sogs / kun bzang mchod sprin rgya mtshor spel te mchod /* (Gter bdag gling pa, *Bka' ma dong sprugs dang gter kha gong 'og ga'i skor*,

Centuries later, Jamgon Kongtrul ('Jam mgon kong sprul, 1813-1899) in his *Treasury of Knowledge*, also describes music as offering:

In contrast to [mundane music and dance], which cause the mind to wander in all directions due to fleeting attachments and the desire to dress provocatively, the [ritual] playing of large and small drums, as well as big-boss cymbals (*sbub chol*) and small-boss cymbals (*sil snyan*) is integral to the way of [secret] mantra, with the purpose of making offerings to the [three] precious jewels (*dkon mchog*).<sup>6</sup>

Flowers are offered to appeal to the sight, incense to smell, butter lamps give light, food satisfies the sense of taste, music is directed to the sense of hearing. If one of the elements is missing it can be imagined though they are generally listed as a set and offered as such, real or imagined. The collection of offerings used in Tibetan ritual is grounded in all the senses. While the term “visualization” is habitually used to describe the generation of offerings and deities, what is being “visualized” can actually be smells, sights, or sounds. An open question remains: are we being overwhelmed by the privilege given to vision? Are imagined smells and sound for example “smelled” and “heard”?

In my own fieldwork, I worked for many years with Phursang Lama (phur bzang, 1938-2016), the former ritual music director at the Tibetan Buddhist monastery, Karmaraj Mahavihar, at Swayambhu stūpa in Kathmandu. Phursang Lama was a Karma Kagyu (karma bka' brgyud) monk raised in Tibet who fled to Nepal in 1959 and, as such, was a member of a fading generation of monks trained in pre-1959 Tibet.<sup>7</sup> In a 2009 presentation at the Latse Library in New York City, he was asked, “how does music serve Tibetan Buddhism?” (I think what the questioner meant was, what is the role of music in Tibetan Buddhism?—which is how Phursang Lama responded). He replied:

From the practitioner's point of view, when you engage in a Tantra meditation, especially when you do the extensive visualizations and you engage in transforming yourself into a deity, you visualize all the offerings that you would offer to the field of these Buddhas and Bodhisattavas. When you invite Buddhas and Bo-

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260:3). This passage is also found in Blo gros mtha' yas, *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (Vol. 31: 504).

<sup>6</sup> Jamgon Kongtrul 2012, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup> Phursang Lama passed away in December 2016 and this paper is dedicated to his profound learning and devotion.

dhisattvas in front of you, and then you again visualize yourself as a deity, and from your heart you spread the offering helpers who bring offerings to the deity in front of you, for the practitioner's point of view, it [the music] is important because it is part of your practice.<sup>8</sup>

Phursang Lama not only describes music as an offering, carried to the deity by visualized helpers, he also explains the mechanisms of the ritual—the visualizations and the identification of the self with the deity.

In answer to the question “what is the role of music in Tibetan ritual” we see both an answer— “music as offering” and also the start of a further inquiry. Music is one of a set of offerings, appealing to all senses, that is used in rituals and that leads ultimately, as Phursang says, to a visualization of oneself as a deity. Before moving on to the implications of this type of visualization upon conceptions of self, we must first ask, what kind of music should be offered, what are the aesthetics of the music offerings?

### 3. *The Aesthetics of the ritual music offerings: What do the gods listen to?*

In answer to the question regarding aesthetics let us look at how music offerings are described.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary musicologist Gendün Phelgye (Dge 'dun 'phel rgyas) in an article on Tibetan Buddhist music in the *Tibetan arts journal* (*Bod ljongs sgyu tshal zhib 'jug*) writes:

In order to satisfy the pleasure of the outer, inner, and secret gods and protectors, and the assembly of gods of the mandala of this and the transcendent world, offer many outer, inner, and secret offerings. From the offering of sung melodies, flow all the tributaries of the ocean of melody and pleasant and beautiful ritual music (*rol mo*<sup>10</sup>).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The translations here and below from Phursang Lama were done by the Tibetan translator at the presentation. All other translations, unless otherwise referenced, are my own with accompanying responsibility for any mistakes.

<sup>9</sup> Vantor in his 1976 article “Aesthetics and Ritual Music” states that “The *raison d'être* of this music is therefore far removed from any preoccupation with aesthetics.” (1976:32) While this is true from a Western art perspective, I propose that an examination of textual sources along with discussion from contemporary practitioners, neither of which he included, reveals a vital focus on conceptions of beauty in the music.

<sup>10</sup> *Rol mo* is a highly multivalent term used to mean cymbals as well as ritual music as a whole. In this context I have translated it as “ritual music”.

“Pleasant” here is *snyan* while “beautiful” is what I translated from the Tibetan *yid 'ong*. I chose this passage because it densely packs in two sentences the conception of music as a beautiful offering and the motivation behind the offering. One offers pleasant and beautiful music in order to please the deities.

From the Mindroling tradition, reading Terdag Lingpa (Gter bdag gling pa, 1646-1714), we also see a description of music as pleasing and beautiful:

Pleasing melody is attractive, smooth melody  
dissolves into the pleasant sound of the gods.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the *Tengyur* there is a variation in a passage from Zhi ba lha's *Entering the Bodhisattva's Conduct*, where *snyan* is used with *yid 'ong*.

Ritual music possessing pleasant qualities and beauty.<sup>13</sup>

Both of these texts use the word *snyan*. Gendün Phelgye and Zhi Ita ba also use *yid 'ong* while Terdag Lingpa writes *yid 'phrog*.

*Snyan* (in its nominalized form *snyan pa*) is a term rich in overlapping meanings. It is generally translated as “pleasant,” as in pleasing to the ears, and is used to refer to what is heard, such as speech and music. “*Yid 'ong*” is also at times translated as pleasant along with “lovely”, “beautiful”, “attractive”. With *yid 'ong* (and with *yid 'phrog*) there is a definite connotation of being beautiful or attractive to the mind.

Again turning to a contemporary perspective, Phursang Lama in the Latse Library conference was asked why the ritual music sounds like it does. He replied:

As you heard the sound of the cymbals [which he had just demonstrated], you might wonder why we are using this kind of music in the monastery. To us, the essence of the ritual music is a form of offering, that offering should appeal to the ear of the Buddhas and

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<sup>11</sup> *phyi nang gsang ba'i lha dang bsrung ma 'jig rten dang 'jig rten las 'das pa'i dkyil 'khor lha tshogs rnams dgyes pa skongs phyir phyi nang gsang gsum gyi mchod pa rnam pa mang po 'bul ba blang ba sgra dbyangs kyi mchod pa las dbyangs kyi yan lag rgya mtsho'i sgra kun gyi zhes dang rol mo dbyangs snyan yid 'ong rnams zhes sogs*

<sup>12</sup> *dbyangs snyan yid 'phrog 'jam pa'i dbyangs sgra yi lha mo snyan la thim* (Gter-bdag gling pa, Gter bdag gling pa, *Bka' ma dong sprugs dang gter kha gong 'og ga'i skor* 214).

<sup>13</sup> *Rol mo dbyangs snyan yid 'ong ldan* (Zhi ba lha, *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod la 'jug pa*, Vol. 61 : 957).

Bodhisattvas. Any beautiful and melodious sound which is pleasant can be offered as a music offering.

Again we see in his statement the formulation of music as offering, an offering that should be beautiful (he used the word *snyan pa* here). But he goes on to say that any melodious sound can be used as a musical offering and it is here that we can detour from aesthetics to ask about motivation, a detour that will ultimately reframe the issues of function and aesthetics.

But before we detour, I have to say that the diversion will not fully answer the question—so just what is beautiful and pleasing? What are the characteristics of the beautiful and pleasing? A more recent work by contemporary Tibetologist Sangdag (gsang bdag) suggests that it is a balance between harsh and pleasant sounds and between sound-with-melody and sound-without-melody.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, traditional conceptions of music evoke that it should fit the character of the deity, that is, fierce deities such as Mahākāla should be offered fierce music, peaceful deities should be offered peaceful music, and so on. But what remains an outstanding question for research is, what in particular constitutes a “beautiful” melody and what is considered a normative, well-executed performance?

#### 4. *The motivation behind musically beautiful offerings*

In the Latse conference, Phursang Lama was questioned about what practitioners think of when they play the music during a ritual. He replied,

We make the music as a form of offering and when you provide these kinds of offerings, one of the really important things to remember is that as we enjoy pleasant sounds (*snyan pa*), and beautiful melodies, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas also enjoy beautiful sound. And so our ultimate goal is to please the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with a beautiful sound, our motivation is to please them with a beautiful sound to [their] ears. That is the initial thinking we have. And then when we make these beautiful sounds, we imagine that they hear them in a very beautiful way and that they become pleased with these sounds. That’s how we think when we are making this music.

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<sup>14</sup> Gsang bdag 2001, p. 3.

The motivation behind the music is to please the deities of the ritual. Underlying the practice of the ritual is the motivation, as usually conceptualized across sects of Tibetan Buddhism, to obtain Buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings through the means of wisdom and compassion. Tashi Gyatso (bkra shis rgya mtsho), a Nyingma author of a commentary on the ritual objects used by the Nyingma sect, explains,

In order to keep secret from normal beings and to dispel darkness and delusion, the yogi, through the supreme secret practice, should use all the materials [i.e. instruments] that give voice to sound pleasantly, all the various sources [of sound] of ritual music, such as the conch, *mkhar* drum, clay drum, *damaru*, *pi wang*, and *ko ko li*, in order to arrive close to perfection.<sup>15</sup>

Some portions of this passage remain a bit opaque. I reference the passage, however, because it once again brings up the aesthetic of *snyan pa*, of a sound being pleasant and furthermore suggests motivations for the music, namely, to dispel darkness and delusion and to arrive closer to perfection through the practice of the music. The author goes on:

Furthermore, to the yogic practitioner, as for what is called ritual music (*rol mo*), its appearance is music of the mind. To the common person, it appears to the mind as music.<sup>16</sup>

This is a knotty passage, but one of particular importance. I interpret the meaning as follows: to the ritual practitioner, the manifestation, or appearance, of music is actually music of the mind. The appearance and the music are one (the Tibetan uses the linking verb *yin* as in *X is Y*). To the common person, music moves the mind but is merely an appearance. In the next section we return to an analysis of the dynamic of visualizing oneself as the deity in the ritual practice, which I think will make this passage clearer. It is evident though, in both Phursang's view and more so in Tashi Gyatso (et al.)'s writing, that motivation is a key element. The motivation to make sounds pleasant to the deities makes the sounds pleasant. It is the motivation that supplies the aesthetics. Tashi Gyatso further grounds this in a

<sup>15</sup> *sgrub mchog gsang bas rnal 'byor ba / skye ba'i yid rnam gsang phyir dang / gti mug mun pa gzhom pa'i phyir / dung dang mkhar rnga rdza rnga dang / cang te'u pir wang ko ko li / snyan par sgrogs pa'i rdzas rnam kun / sna tshogs 'byung ba'i rol mo ste / nye bar rdzogs su 'byor bar bya* (Bkra shis rgya mtsho et al. 1996: 128-129).

<sup>16</sup> *de yang rol mo zhes pa rnal 'byor bas snang ba / sems kyi rol mo yin la gang zag phal pa rnam ni / sems snang bas rol mo 'gyur ro* (Bkra shis rgya mtsho et al. 1996, 129)

Buddhist soteriology that orients ritual (and its music components) toward the path of dispelling darkness and delusion.

5. Ricœur's "Being-as": the move from aesthetics to ontology

"Ritual becomes a domain of human experience and cultural production that offers a respite from hermeneutic anxiety."<sup>17</sup>

In my conclusion I want to enlist the assistance of concepts of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In his later works (the series *Time and Narrative*), he suggests a homologous mode of understanding which can be adopted in an examination of the complex elements that constitute Tibetan ritual. In these works, Ricœur turns his attention to how meaning is created in metaphor and narrative and how this newly created meaning reveals a new sense of being. A distinguishing characteristic of Ricœur's hermeneutics is its world disclosing aspect. As we have seen in our discussion of music as offering within a highly structured ritual performance of transformation, Tibetan rituals lead the practitioner to the disclosure of a world that he or she could inhabit. John Powers in his discussion of deity yoga emphasized the repetition of ritual as a "technique for becoming progressively more familiar with the thoughts and deeds of a Buddha, until the state of Buddhahood is actualized."<sup>18</sup> In this sense we are addressing a soteriology, a religious system designed to induce a *metanoia*, a change at a fundamental basis of the self.

In *Time and Narrative* Ricœur expounds "The plot of a narrative... 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative as a whole".<sup>19</sup> Ricœur's theory of narrative situates understanding in a schematizing operation, which, in the case of fictional and historical narratives, suspends the referential function of descriptive language in order to posit a remade world of reordered connections. "What is communicated, in the final analysis is, beyond the sense of a work, the world it projects and that constitutes its horizon."<sup>20</sup> In demonstrating that poetical language incorporates a capacity for revealing a level of reference deeper than that of descriptive language, he points to "those ontological aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be spoken of directly.

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<sup>17</sup> Scharf 2008: 252.

<sup>18</sup> Powers 2007, 272.

<sup>19</sup> Ricœur 1984, I, x.

<sup>20</sup> Ricœur 1984, 77.



*Seeing as* thus not only implies a *saying as* but also a *being as*.<sup>21</sup> In Tibetan ritual, the “seeing as” of the visualizations leads to the “being-as” of the deity. The use of the word “visualization” might seem to presuppose the predominance of the visual sense but in fact, as we have seen above, the offerings provided to the deities of the ritual encompass all the senses. Here we can think again about the knotty little statement of Tashi Gyatso (et al.): “Furthermore, to the yogic ritual practitioner, as for what is called ritual music (*rol mo*), its appearance is music of the mind. To the common person it appears to the mind as music.” To the yogic practitioner, the music moves beyond appearance, beyond “seeing as” to “being-as” music of the mind.

Ritual music, as an offering motivated by the desire to please the deity, is an element of a ritual constructed to remake the horizons of the practitioner. It is part of ritual system that enables, through a fusion of horizons with the deity of a ritual, the experience of new intelligible modes of being. This proposal of selfhood entered into through the performance of Tibetan ritual engages all of the senses, and is inherently linked to the motivations of the practitioner. In such a formulation a beautiful musical offering becomes both a structured performance of a traditional musical system and a fluid, horizon-stretching container of religious experience. In this regard we can move beyond the descriptive sense of “what do the gods listen to” to a mode of being where we can “listen with” the gods.

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<sup>21</sup> Kearney 1989, 17.

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