Music and Sound in Tibetan Buddhism: A Collection of Field Recordings

It was little surprise to any of my friends or professors when I told them that I would be on the lookout for music during our month in China. Because I am a violin performance student, nearly every paper I've ever written for a history class has dealt in some way with music as a historical subject. While many in our group created a visual documentation of their subjects as the trip progressed, I carried a Tascam DR-40 audio recorder nearly everywhere we went and recorded anything I found intriguing. Thus, this is the first time that a project of mine has focused on what are essentially live field recordings of music, rather than textual sources about music. By the end of our trip I had amassed nearly three hours of material both musical and non-musical, as well as plenty of stuff in between. But after some examination, however, I found that the most interesting and most cohesive body of recordings which I had captured came from our one-week stay in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (May 31 – June 6, 2012), and particularly from the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries we visited there.¹

In Tibet, we stayed in the cities of Lhasa, Shigatse, and Gyantse, and in each we visited some of Tibet's most famous and historically significant monasteries. These places are undoubtedly visually impressive. Each one houses statues of blue and gold Buddhas, fearsome and colorful protectors deities, and upright Buddhist kings of the past. The architecture, such as the massive Potala Palace in Lhasa, is at times breathtaking. But besides the visual, there was an undeniable, unique aural element to the religious sites we visited, underscored by the fact that each monastery we visited had its own distinctive aural qualities. Despite the Chinese government's current

¹ In this essay, I will also be referencing recordings which were taken at Songzanlin monastery, in Shangri-la, Yunnan, and a monastery in Lashihai, Yunnan. Though these monasteries are not in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, they are in ethnically Tibetan areas.
restrictions on monasticism and its iconoclastic history in Tibet, our group was not visiting monasteries-as-museums. We were visiting places where Tibetan Buddhism is still actively practiced, and we could hear it. I argue that in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries we visited, music and sound are an integral part of both lay and monastic practice and serve a functional religious purpose. Using my field recordings and a discussion on Buddhist Music by Ian Mabbett to illuminate them, I will demonstrate that many of the sounds we heard in Tibet's monasteries were meant to serve one or more of the following religious ends: indicate of the generation of merit, symbolize Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, to dissolve the practitioner's sense of self, and be used as an offering. In short, Tibetan Buddhism, in addition to the visual, has a very aural quality and the recordings I will present here will convey a small part of what it sounds like to practice it.

**Functional Sound in Tibetan Buddhism**

*The Generation of Merit* – At many Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, one can find prayer wheels: golden barrels meant to be spun clockwise. They vary in size and number – in Lhasa, nearly the entire western edge of the path around the Potala Palace was lined with small ones (look: Prayer Wheels at Drepung), while Lashihai and Songzanllin monastery had several which were taller than a person and were meant to be spun by multiple people. By spinning these wheels one generates merit, which in Buddhism improves your chances of a better rebirth. A number of these prayer wheels stood apart from the others, though, in that they were connected to bells, such that they would strike the bell after each full rotation (listen: Large Prayer Wheel and Bell (Songzanlin), Large Prayer Wheel at Lashihai). Strangely enough, it was in fact this apparatus which made me start thinking about how sound is used in Buddhism. Given the understanding that by spinning such a wheel generates merit, and that each rotation produces a sound, I would argue that what we're hearing when a person spins one of these prayer wheels is actually the sound

2 In this recording, you can actually hear two of these bell/prayer wheel devices. The lower, less-frequent tone is from a large wheel, taller than a person, while the high-pitched one is from a wheel about a foot tall. For an up-close recording of the smaller prayer wheel, listen here: Smaller Prayer Wheel and Bell at Lashihai.
of merit being generated. In this process, the bell is essentially a “byproduct” of merit generation, and I imagine it could also serve to inform the practitioner of the efficacy of what he is doing.

I found another example of the connection between sound and merit on the night of Saga Dawa (June 4, 2012), one of the most significant Buddhist festivals of the year, which celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Sakyamuni Buddha. We were fortunate enough to be in Lhasa on the day of the festival, where thousands of pilgrims came to perform a kora, or clockwise circumambulation, around the Potala Palace. In order to get an up close view of the spectacle, our group decided to perform kora as well. While we, and many others, chose to perform our kora by simply walking, there were many devout pilgrims around the Potala that night who chose to prostrate themselves – one body length at a time – around the palace instead of walking (look: Prostrators and Prayer Wheels on Saga Dawa). Those who preferred to walk instead donated small amounts of money to these devout prostrators as they went, and the prostrators kept these bills threaded between their fingers. However, no pilgrim had nearly as much money on display as a group of four lay seated along the western side of the Potala, singing and clapping a rhythm in unison (listen: Lay Pilgrims Singing on Sagadawa). These pilgrims literally had a bucket full of bills in front of them, and people continued to donate as they sang.

In general in Buddhism, a donation signifies the giver’s belief that the recipient is pure or devout enough to warrant the generation of merit in return for the donation. For example, those who prostrated around the temple were demonstrating their devotion by doing so, which made appear good “targets” for donation.\(^3\) What does it say, then, that the singers were being at least as much money as those prostrating themselves around the Potala that night? Following the logic I just discussed, I would take it to mean that their singing of a mantra showed devotion or purity, and therefore made them a worthy target of donations, much in the same way that performing a

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\(^3\) One question we could never figure out was, where is this money expected to end up? The temple or the lay person’s pocket?
kora by prostration does. If this analysis is right, then it means that by virtue of the music, donors believed that their money was well placed. I believe we could call this interaction, too, the sound of merit being generated. The pilgrims sing, others donate, and the mantra being chanted – much like the ringing of a bell on a prayer wheel – indicates that the people singing are devout enough for a donation to warrant the generation of merit.

_Sound as Cosmological Symbolism_ – Ian Mabbett, in his article “Buddhism and Music,” discusses how musical form can be used as a sacramental tool; that is, as a means of accessing a sacred realm or state of mind. By singing certain mantras, prayers, or recitations, or by playing certain instruments – together or alone – a monk can “establish a conduit by which, temporarily, the line between the two realms [sacred and profane] is breached and contact is made with the transcendent.”

Mabbett’s article focuses predominantly on how sound is used as a religious tool by the clergy, and I believe it is wholly applicable to the numerous recordings of monks I made in the monasteries we visited in Tibet.

By performing them, music and instrument can be used by the clergy to symbolize certain elements of Buddhist cosmology. For instance, loud, long sessions of chanting in the Tibetan monastic tradition can suddenly turn into silence, producing “an emotional impact that cannot help evoking the transition to the formless; in effect the abrupt opening of a vista upon Nirvana itself.”

The abrupt absence of sound can act as a tool which symbolizes the “nothingness” associated with Buddhist enlightenment, helping the monk to experience (in a microcosmic or simulated way) what that enlightenment is like. While in Tibet, I was not able to record such a complete, abrupt cessation of sound, however I believe one recording – from Palchen monastery in Gyantse – may contain something similar.

Before arriving in Gyantse, the farthest town from Lhasa we traveled to, we had heard large

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groups of monks chanting and praying together. However, our visit to Palchen Monastery was the first time we were able to hear such a group with percussion instruments played at the same time. The ensemble consisted of a large group (100+) of monks chanting, several drummers, and a handful of players who used loud, metal percussion instruments such as bells and cymbals (look: A Drum Like the Kind Used at Palchen Monastery). At one point in their “performance,” the massive sound of the percussion instruments suddenly cut out, leaving only the sound of chanting (listen: Percussion Dropout (at 0:26)). In contrast to the tumult of the percussion, the sound of voices alone was very quiet. Though it is not the same as a complete, abrupt silence, I wonder if this sudden absence of percussion, leaving only voices, could serve the same kind of cosmological function which Mabbett discusses. Whether or not I was able to capture such an abrupt silence, Mabbett's discussion of their possibility in monastic chant still serves to show one of the religious functions of sound in Tibetan Buddhism.

As a Ritual Offering – Ian Mabbett also reminds us that music and sound can take the form of an offering, much like offerings of food, liquor, or juniper which are so common at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. In Tibet, he states, almost all recitations of scripture and prayers (including the mental kind – thought, but never physically intoned), can be thought of as a kind of offering. “Music in ceremonies as an offering to please the ears of the deity; it is like inviting a guest to your home and offering the best you have.” We certainly saw plenty of this kind of music while in Tibet: monasteries at Gyantse, Drepung, and Lashihai had mass prayer ceremonies while we visited (listen: ).

In addition, one of the most common aural features of Tibetan Buddhism we encountered in monasteries was the lone monk, or small group of monks, reciting scripture by chanting (listen: Monk at Tashilhumpo (1), Monk at Tashilhumpo (2)). Often, each significant room in a monastery was staffed by at least one monk who sat off to one side of the room, presiding over the area. At

6 Mabbett, 22.
times, the monk would remain silent, or he would converse quietly with the people around him. But at others, the monk “on duty,” so to speak, would be chanting prayers, either by recitation or from a book in front of him, while rubbing the beads of a rosary. In short, on many occasions such monks provided the aural backdrop to our monastery visits in Tibet. Because of Mabbett's point that almost any music in Tibetan Buddhism can be seen as an offering, I am persuaded to interpret such individual performances as offerings as well. And, while the sound of one monk chanting from the sidelines of the room was common, there was also variation on this theme. On one occasion, I encountered two such monks presiding over a chapel in Tashilhumpo monastery, where they actually recited their prayers as a “duet” (listen: "Duet" at Tashilhumpo). At Drepung monastery, a monk presiding over a protector deity chapel chanted while beating a drum quite loudly and at a constant rhythm (listen: Monk Drummer at Drepung). At Songzanlin monastery in Shangrila, a group of five monks on the margins of the room chanted quietly, while one of them rang a high-pitched bell (listen: Songzanlin Monastery Group).

**Dissolve the Practitioner's Sense of Self** – In Buddhism, the “self” is the idea that there is something permanent and unique, unaffected by causes and conditions, which makes us the same person throughout our lives, and inherently different from all other people. It is perhaps the central point of Buddhism that this notion is in fact false, and that any sense of self we have is illusory. Thus, to practice Buddhism is to practice no-self, and Mabbett reminds us that music can be used to aid in this goal. In the emotion, excitement, and intensity of participating in a prayer session like the kind we heard at Palchen monastery, the Buddhist monk can, at least temporarily, dissolve his notions of self and become part of a large musical, religious group. Mabbett writes that this would have been even more effective before Tibet's modernization, when few rural Tibetans would have ever participated in anything with more than a few dozen people.\(^7\) Listening to recordings of monks at Gyantse and Drepung, it is not hard to see how a chanting monk could lose himself in

\(^7\) Mabbett, 23.
the recitation of well-memorized prayers with a large ensemble (listen: Noon Prayers at Drepung, Gyantse Prayer Session (1), Gyantse Prayer Session (2)).

Ian Mabbett's discussion of the uses of music in Buddhism show that the sounds heard in the practice of Buddhism are not simply “noise,” but actually serve a sacramental purpose for the practitioner. Music and instruments can symbolize the nature of the universe as it is understood in the Buddhist tradition, they can be used as an offering to the Buddhas or other deities, and can be used to illuminate one of Buddhism's core principles: the idea of no-self. Furthermore, my own observations lead me to believe that sound is closely tied to the process of generating merit.

A Final Note

Ultimately one hears much more than just the sacred in Tibet's monasteries today, and I would be giving an unfaithful representation of our aural experience in Tibet if I chose not to talk about the other things one can hear there. Tibet's monasteries are now a destination for at least two kinds of tourists: those with a spiritual motive, and those with a disposable income, largely from eastern China. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 1970s have eventuated in a growing middle class with money to spend; so much so that some can now actually afford vacations to places such as Yunnan and Tibet (listen: Chinese Tour Guide at Tashilhumpo). Interestingly, the growth of this middle class and its interest in tourism has had an aural effect on monasteries in Tibet. The sound of tourists and their tour guides (often equipped with megaphones) often rival or overpower the sound of, say, a group of monks chanting off to the side of a chapel.

Whether the attraction that monasteries have for tourists will ultimately preserve Tibetan Buddhist culture, and by extension its sounds, or deteriorate and homogenize it is unclear to me, as culture tourism has been known to do both. I personally hope for the former; that the aural environment of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries will remain as present and diverse as their visual environment. But in the case that Tibet's monasteries someday become quiet, like the Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple already have, it seems, I will be glad to have made my own small collection.
of primary documents which capture what Tibetan Buddhism sounded like at this point in history.

Other Significant Recordings (not used above)

A Group of Teenage Monks Chanting at Lashihai

A Tibetan Buddhist Debate at Sera Monastery

Debate at Sera Monastery (take 2)

An Entry Bell at Tashihumpo Monastery

A Gong Signaling Noon at Drepung Monastery